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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S *Fantasy* Magazine

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George Barr
As Artist and Author

Interview by:
Darrell Schweitzer

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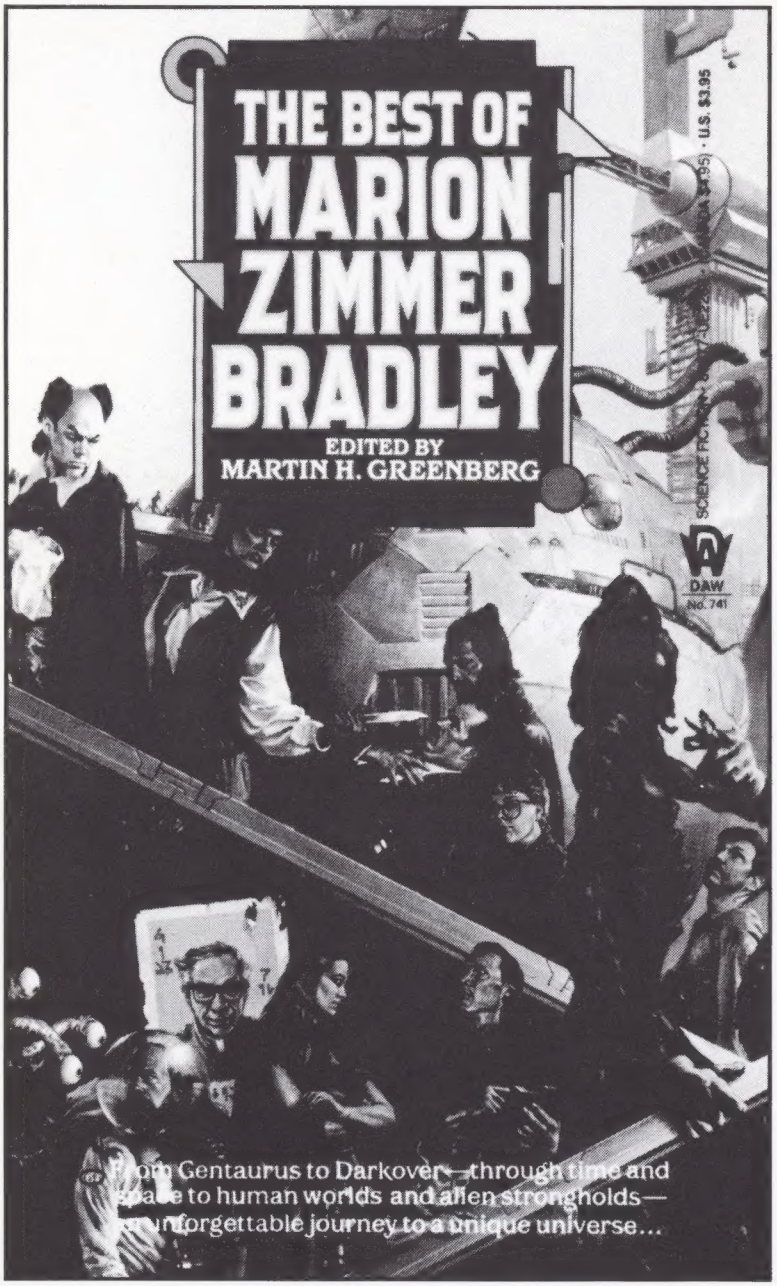

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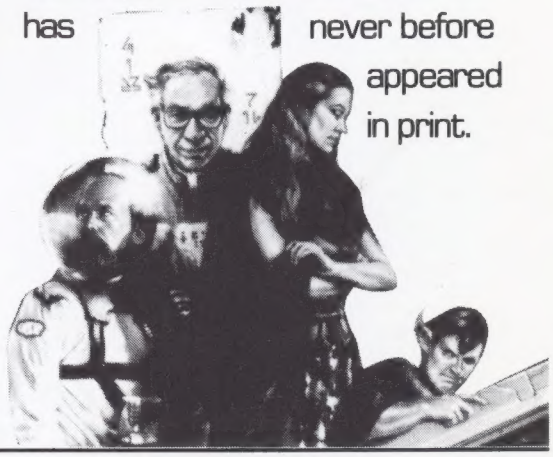

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Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, ISSN-0897-9286, is published quarterly by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ltd.

Business address:
P.O. Box 11095
Piedmont, Ca 94611-9991

We welcome free-lance submissions, please send with SASE to :
PO Box 245-A,
Berkeley, CA 94701

SUBSCRIPTIONS:
Individual copies are $3.95+ $1.00 shipping in the U.S., $5.75 in Canada, and $9.50 foreign.
Individual subscriptions are $14.00 for 4 issues in the U.S., $20.00 for 4 issues in Canada, $30.00 for 4 issues for foreign subscriptions. Make all checks payable to Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine.
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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ltd.,
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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S *Fantasy Magazine*

EDITORIAL

When I started this magazine, it was the culmination of a long dream; it's what I have always wanted to do. After Don Wollheim gave me the opportunity to edit *Sword and Sorceress* I knew I was a pretty good editor. When I went ahead with the magazine I found out—the hard way—that I knew nothing of professional publishing as opposed to editing. My office staff was even more lacking in experience than I was, which created a nightmare for them; so I was forced to rethink much of my plan. I am continuing even if I have to learn the hard way, even by beating my head against a wall. (Thunk!)

My very strong feeling is that this magazine should grow its own way and gain momentum from satisfied readers. We are absolutely committted to this, which is why we have not been doing mass advertising. I suppose I'd really like to be another *Galaxy*—which created its own market. With *Mists of Avalon* I got a sharp lesson; there is only one kind of advertising that's worth anything, and that's word of mouth.

If this project is to succeed, it will do so because of its merit and not because it has become a clone of all the other magazines in the field. They may be doing well; but not as well as they might. All I have to offer is my expertise as a writer and an editor and my commitment to good fiction as the one thing you can't get from TV.

Maybe I'm wrong, but our priority is to give aid and comfort to new writers, offering as much editorial help as we can. If we merely introduce one great writer to the world it will all be worth it. So instead of picking only the berries that are already ripe, we are actively cultivating new plants. It may not be cost-efficient, but it works. At least, we hope it will.

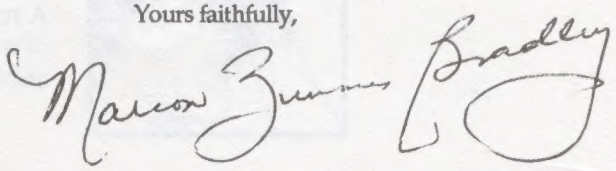
This is probably no way to start a magazine which will turn the world around but frankly, that is what I am out to do. I've done it before; I never thought that the Society for Creative Anachronism would go anywhere, nor that the Friends of Darkover would last more than an issue or two; I have even said when I'm depressed "Just call me Dr. Frankenstein." But if my ability to get things running is any indication, you readers are out there—and the old saying about the better mousetrap may have some meaning after all; the world may not beat a path to my door; but I'll pave the sidewalk—and get out of the way in case of a stampede.

We may be re-inventing the wheel— but I think it's a good one and we are beginning to see what we're aiming for. I am a stubborn sort—some people would say stubborn as a Georgia mule— I do have to try these things before I'm convinced my own way will work (or do I mean my own way won't work?)

If I'm wrong, I may go down—but I'll do it like the Titanic, with all flags flying and the band playing. (Is that the sound of "Nearer My God to Thee" I hear in the distance?).

Whatever may come of this, sooner or later, I want to thank all of you for your continuing input and support. We will always remember those of you who have come through when we most needed it.

Yours faithfully,



MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

Fantasy Magazine

Volume 1 Issue 4 SPRING 1989

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by George Barr
Art by George Barr

A classical fantasy of far away and long ago, on the ancient theme of the bitter bet, by a writer better known for his work as an artist.

Under the Skin *page 20*

by Deborah Wheeler
Art by Stephen Fabian

A modern fantasy dealing with the riddle of a strange woman. Written in the terrifying realization of how easily we can be brought to that fateful choice - - when pain and rage threaten to engulf us utterly, when our every fiber cries out for justice and there is no answer...

Dragon Plague *page 29*

by Mildred Perkins
Art by George Barr

A humorous little tale of a woman who puts her talents to use in an unusal way. A bit of history will help you understand the ending.

Miracle at Roodwell *page 32*

by Brad Strickland
Art by Patricia Breeding-Black

A romantic fantasy of love and the meaning of miracles. Set in late March of 1047, on another planet?

House of Wizards *page 40*

by Laurell Hamilton
Art by Armond Cabrera

Suppose you married into a family of magicians - and had no magic - except your own special kind?

Through the Trees and to the Left *page 59*

by Marina Fitch
Art by Stephen Fabian

If you were granted your wish to move anywhere in time and space - - what then?

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"Virgilius the Sorcer had been taken captive countless times, but nothing could hold him prisoner long..."

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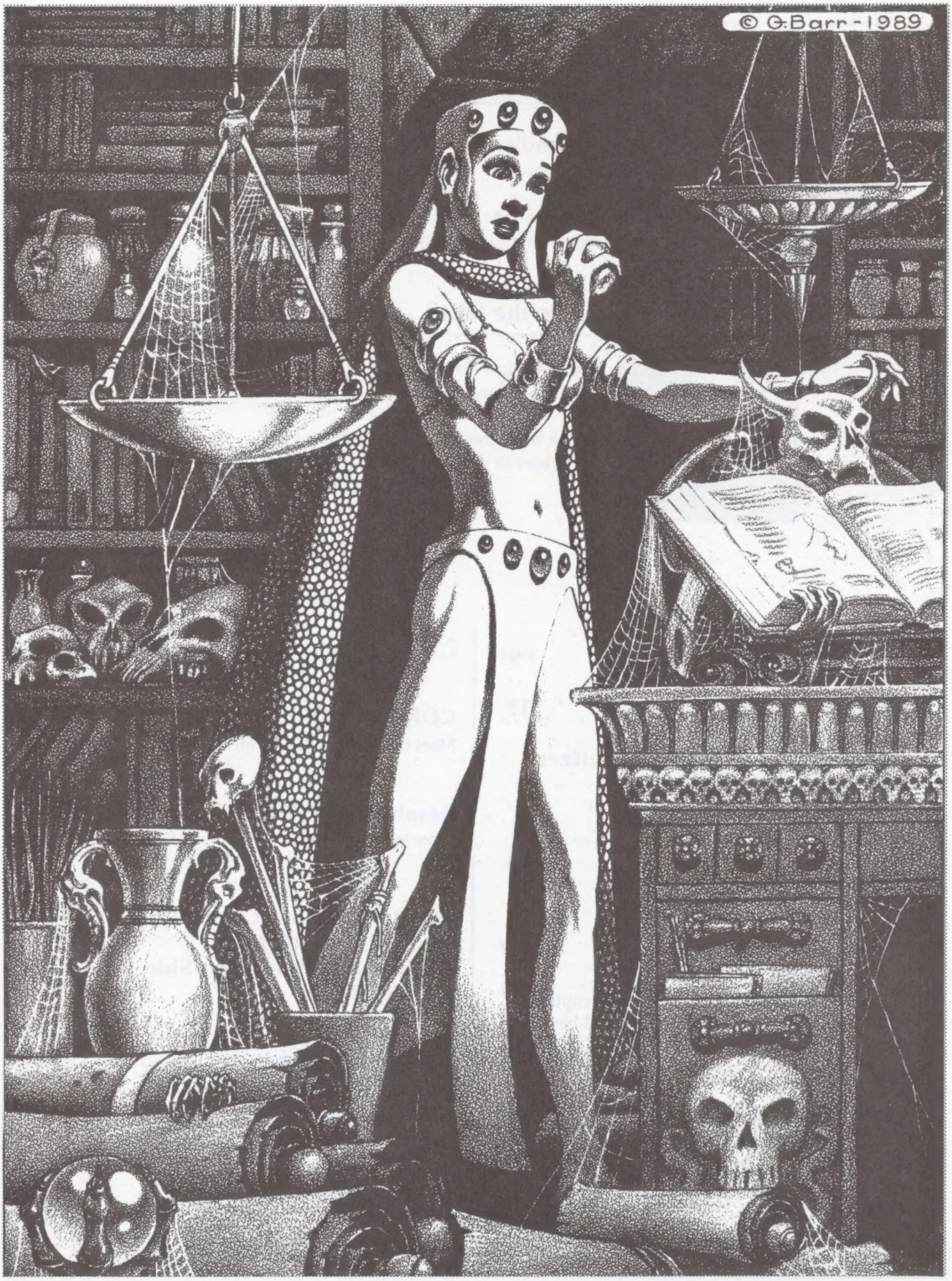
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TALISHADA'S FAMILIAR

by GEORGE BARR

Oob sidled down the cold stone passageway. If observed, his manner would have seemed furtive... apprehensive... almost fearful.

He was, however, quite alone. None save he and his mistress Talishada even knew of the existence of this secret route, which led to long-forgotten chambers.

Its entrance was not *hidden*, in the generally accepted sense of the term. In fact it was open and as broad as any other hallway in the aeons-old fortress, without a door, a gate, or even a drapery to keep out the wind. Instead, a long-dead sorcerer had set a spell to guard it, a simple spell, so unspectacular that no one even suspected the presence of magic.

The hall opened from a now seldom-used passage between a cistern and an abandoned kitchen, once used to prepare simple gruel for prisoners in the dungeons. When the well had dried up, more than a century ago, the kitchen had proven too inconvenient for the next nearest source of ready water. It had become a storage room for anything the servants did not dare discard, but for which they could foresee no immediate need: outdated records, mismatched crockery, worn-but-possibly-repairable furniture, and other cast-offs of a hundred years of living... flotsam left by the tides of time.

The precise point where the secret passageway met the hall was very dim, though not quite dark enough for the servants to have installed a lantern. The windows in both kitchen and cistern rooms gave sufficient light that the entire length of the hall could be seen easily. Anything in the hall would be silhouetted by the lights at either end. Those who walked that distance did so without a second thought, for obviously there was nothing in that hallway which needed to be seen.

The spell which covered the secret doorway was triggered whenever anyone or anything approached. A servant, walking by, would hear a sound-- usually a simple, unthreatening noise such as, perhaps, a large beetle might make scratching its way along a crack in the stone wall; or a click, like a pebble kicked by a sandal; a creak like a tree branch blown against the outside wall by the wind. It would issue from a point opposite the doorway, and be *just* sufficient to turn the individual's attention to the other wall. Never seeing the doorway, over the years everyone had simply forgotten it existed.

How long this spell had been in effect before the day Talishada had dropped an apple, and turned to watch it roll down a passageway she hadn't known was there, she couldn't imagine.

* * *

No, Oob was quite unobserved, which was partly why he felt such apprehension. He'd rather not

Talishada's Familiar

have been alone. He'd rather have been almost anywhere else.

It wasn't the weight of the book he carried which caused him to move so unsteadily; although in truth, it was a heavy tome to have brought all the way down from Talishada's chamber in the eastern tower, to this lowest passageway in the southwest corner of the keep. It was the *content* of the volume, and the fearful use to which it was to be put, that weighed so heavily upon him.

Oob should not have been afraid. Familiars were supposed by most people to be invulnerable, and, *ergo*, fearless. But people were wrong.

Becoming a familiar had not been Oob's idea. His servitude--like so much in magic and sorcery--was the result of an accident, as unplanned as Talishada's discovery of this secret passageway leading to the libraries and laboratory of an ancient sorcerer who had, unguessable years ago, lived deep within this fortress.

The spell which had prevented the hall's discovery by people passing its doorway, had worked equally well on rats and mice. But it proved ineffectual against spiders, boring larvae, and dry rot.

The dusty webs of generations of tiny spinners were as thick as draperies. Talishada moved among them timidly... and angrily. Her anger was directed at herself for being timid at entering rooms in a fortress her family had held for more than a millennium.

At seventeen years of age, a girl in a world controlled by men, Talishada's hauteur and arrogance had been all too often only the outward effect of her constant efforts to keep from trembling. The lovely, lithe figure she did so little to hide was displayed, in part, precisely because it kept men's eyes from meeting her own, where her fear might show. She didn't mind being stared at; the interest men showed gave her a sense of power, and power was all that she'd seen of any real value in life.

It was power, too, that she had sensed in these ancient rooms: latent power, slumbering fitfully beneath the spider webs and dust... the power contained within crumbling scrolls and time-scarred manuscripts.

To a bookrack festooned with spider webs like bridal wreaths, she was drawn by a thick volume, bound in heavy leather and secured by a band of bronze. Its placement upon the sorcerer's desk proved its importance as a reference work he had wanted never far from his hand.

After a brief survey of the rooms, it was this book she'd carried to her chambers in the tower, to pore over its content, and wonder at its meaning.

Talishada found the fragile old tome held a variety of formulae so complex that, despite her avid desire to test their effectiveness, there was no imaginable way for her to obtain the required ingredients. Many of them she could not believe had ever really existed.

One spell, however, required only ordinary incense, enough chalk to draw upon the floor, and a spoken incantation. It seemed, moreover, to answer her dreams of power, for its purpose was to summon a *familiar*, to do whatsoever she bade and be immune to all magic other than her own.

It was but the work of a few moments to mark the required symbols upon the worn stones of her bedchamber, set the incense alight, and to read aloud the three paragraphs of complex magic designed to summon the familiar.

Oob, in his own world, was going about his business unaware that any world save his own existed, when the ground gave way beneath his feet. Gaping like the mouth of a lamprey, it sucked him into clinging depths. This was no window, through which one might peer into another world, no portal through which a questing hand might reach.

This spell strained the fabric of two co-existing planes, until a tear produced an eddy in the force which held them apart. Into that rent, whichever being first chanced upon it was drawn, and forced like thick mortar through a funnel, to be warped by the wishes of the conjuror into whatever shape was desired.

Talishada, unprepared, had no clear concept of the sort of familiar she desired. She'd begun with no vision in mind, and in truth, had not the power of concentration to hold steady such an image if she'd had one.

Cats, she'd heard from old tales, and misshapen dwarves often served as familiars. She liked cats, and found dwarves amusing, but she didn't wanted her familiar to be ugly or frightening. She hoped it would seem, as its title implied, *familiar*... no more menacing than her favorite childhood toy, a comical rabbit of soft, sewn leather, stuffed like a pillow with cotton.

From those conflicting mental images Oob's body was unfortunately formed: some suggestion of a cat, a lot of dwarf, with the out sized, ungainly hands and feet of a stuffed toy. All that remained of his own shape were the twin, jewel-tipped tendrils that sprouted from his brow: sensory organs unknown in Talishada's plane, and apparently no more useful here than gills on a camel.

As Oob sat stunned within the chalked design, examining with alarm his new shape, he wanted to curl up and die of embarrassment. He was all but oblivious to the lovely girl before him.

"What is your name?" she demanded.

"Oob," he replied.

Skepticism had shown on her pretty face. "Is that your name, or just an expression of how you feel?"

He had wanted to reply that it was the entire knowledge of the universe, reduced to one simple syllable; that was the kind of sarcasm which came naturally to him. But it was not the truth, and he found he could not lie.

"It is my name."

"I am your mistress," she an-

nounced, raising her chin, drawing back her sholders and managing to strut without taking a step.

"Oh, will we sleep together when my wife is away?" he asked blandly.

Her fair face and bare shoulders blushed rosy pink. "You know very well what I mean. I am a sorceress, and you are my familiar."

"If you're my mistress," Oob said, trying to grin with his strange new face, "it's best we *both* be a little familiar."

"Do not be disrespectful," she said, blushing anew. "You must obey my commands."

Oob knew nothing of being a familiar. But the requirements were soon made abundantly clear. They were not "rules" in the same sense as the directions for playing a game, which could be bent, cheated, or ignored. They were *laws* as incontrovertible as those which dictated that the sun arose in the east, that all things ultimately died, that objects tossed in the air would fall again to the ground. There was no bargaining ... no negotiating. The incantation imposed servitude upon Oob.

He obeyed. He couldn't *not* obey.

He was subject to his mistress's stated commands.

And, he could not lie to her.

She was yet to learn, much to her frustration, that he was not *magic*. He was no djinn who could snap into existance whatever she might wish. He was simply a slave, with whatever talents he possessed at her disposal according to *his* abilities.

Because she had commanded it, he could not be disrespectful.

"I did but make a joke, Mistress," he said. "It is my way, when I am frightened and unsure."

"Of what are *you* frightened?" Talishada asked, glancing about apprehensively.

"I find myself suddenly, without warning, in a world not my own, in a *body* not my own, and for no reason I understand, enslaved to someone I do not know. All I know is that I *must* obey you. *Of course* I am frightened! I have no reason to believe that *my* comfort and welfare are going to concern you overmuch."

"I told you not to be disrespectful," Talishada snapped. "Yet you continue to insult me."

"I cannot lie to you, Mistress," Oob said, glumly. "You asked of what was I frightened. What you interpret as insult, is honesty. I do not know what will happen if you *order* me to be polite at the expense of the truth. I cannot lie, and I cannot disobey you. Perhaps that conflict would send me back from whence I came... or kill me."

"I cannot *bross* at a shoe." He spread his four-fingered hands helplessly. "*Brossing* doesn't do anything. You can't see me do it..."

Talishada thought on that for a while.

With a disquieting sensation along his spine, Oob realized that his mistress was curious to see what really *would* occur if such a paradox were invoked. That she did not, was *solely* because she hesitated to lose her newly-acquired familiar; she had no concern for what it might do to him. He recognized that he'd fallen prey to a most uncharitable being... and that he himself was likely to be the *only* one to care about his comfort and welfare.

Then and there, Oob resolved to be very careful how he answered her questions. He had to tell her the truth, but he was not required to volunteer anything beyond the specifics for which she asked. His servitude did not require him to be concerned for Talishada's well-being unless she so commanded. If she had not the wit to ensure his loyalty with carefully worded orders, he did not have to suggest it. He began to think upon what he could, by taking her at her precise word, get away with *not* doing.

"What are those things on your head?" Talishada asked. "Are they extra eyes?"

"No, Mistress. They are my *trin*."

"*Trin*?" Her face revealed fascination with a term she'd never heard, and irritation that it was not self-explanatory. "What are they for?"

"I *bross* with them," he said carefuly. "At least I do in my own world."

"*Bross?*" Again she examined the sound and form of a new word. "What is *bross?*"

Oob shrugged, ineffectually. "I hear with my ears. I see with my eyes. I *bro* with my *trin*. I don't know how to explain it; I just *do* it."

Talishada did not like his answer. "*Bross* something," she commanded. "Here! *Bross* my shoe." She took it off her foot, and set it on the floor between them. "Let me see you do it."

"I cannot *bross* at a shoe." He spread his four-fingered hands helplessly. "*Brossing* doesn't *do* anything. You can't *see* me do it, any more than you can see me see something. I think of a friend. I *bross* at him. And I know how he *fracitates*."

"*Fracitates*!" she exploded. "You are making up words! I command you to stop it. Tell me the truth!"

"I am telling you the truth," he said, respectfully, because she had commanded respect. "I cannot explain to you something which is beyond your understanding. I *bross*. I can *bro* how someone *fracitates*. I know if he is *gleed*, or *sunt*, or a little *smadger*. I cannot explain these things. How would you explain *yellow* to a man without eyes? Who has *never* seen? It cannot be done."

Warily she held her head high, her expression warning him to be careful. "*Bross* at me!" she ordered.

Talishada's Familiar

"Tell me if *I* am a little *smadger*. But do not *do* anything to me."

Oob tried, but it was like winking at a man in a blindfold; there was no response. He *broed* only her frustration. "I can't. I can only *bro* that you are not pleased."

"Could you... *bro* that," she asked, "if I had my back turned? Or if you had *your* back turned?"

"Yes," he said simply, not adding that he could also have *broed* it from half a world away.

"But you cannot read my thoughts?" she asked, with an expression which suggested that, for his own safety, it had best be so.

"No. I cannot read thoughts I could *bro* more, if you had *trin*. But you do not."

For a long moment she stared at him, taking in his size (not too much less than her own) and the details of his odd construction.

"If you had only one of your *trin*," she asked, "could you still... *bross?*"

"Yes," he nodded, adding no explanation.

"How well?" she persisted.

"To a lesser degree," he admitted, reluctantly. "If you were *smadger*, I'd *bro* it, but I couldn't *bro* HOW *smadger*."

"What IS *smadger* ?" she asked. How could I be *smadger*, and not even know the word?"

Oob struggled for a way to explain. "If you were blind, and you were embarrassed, you'd blush. You'd *feel* the blush, but being blind, you would not know that I, at a distance, could *see* that blush, and therefore know of your embarrassment. And I could not explain to you the reddening of your face, because you'd have no way of understanding what *red* was, nor how I could perceive, from across a room, what you felt only as warmth on your face.

"So I *bross* at you, *bro* that you are *smadger*, and by moving my *trin* apart and together *bro* just HOW *smadger* you are.

"If you are ill, I can *feel* the heat of your fever. I can *hear* the shortness of your breath. I can *see* the pallor of your skin. I can *bro* how *smadger* you are. Or I could, if you had *trin*. You don't."

"I do not like this," she said, dangerously.

"Why?" he asked. "I would have thought you'd *want* a familiar who could do things you cannot. Otherwise, why have one at all?"

After a moments pondering, she asked, "Can you use this ability in my service? Because if you cannot, I will order you to rip off the silly things. They are of no value to me."

The idea was terrifying. If Oob ever got back to his own world, and no longer had *trin*, he'd be handicapped beyond measure.

"I don't know yet," he said honestly. "It will take some time to learn of what use I can be... with or without *trin*."

Days stretched into years... many long years. Oob came to know intimately every chink and crevice in the fortress, while Talishada grew from a self-centered, strong-willed girl into a woman of iron: cold, implacable, and cruel.

In appearance, however, she changed very little, for various spells from the old book had aided her in holding off the visible marks of time's passing. What seemed but pretty petulance on the girlish surface was often deep and mature anger. Those who provoked her, always rued having done so.

Oob saw the change from mild mischief to calculated vengeance with tremendous guilt, for he was too often her instrument of revenge. Had it not been for him, his mistress could not so easily have carried out her schemes. Long since, she'd have erred in her judgment, made a mistake or two, and been discovered in her plotting.

As it was, she could hatch her plan, order Oob to carry it out, and arrange to be elsewhere when her hateful trick was played.

The first time that Oob had ventured from her chambers, bent on mischief she had concocted, he had expected his appearance to cause a furor. He couldn't imagine that he could walk through the crowded keep without attracting immediate attention; but the spell which had drawn him into Talishada's service had provided for that. She alone could see him for what he was. To anyone else, he was simply whatever would seem least remarkable in the circumstances: a dog, or an urchin, or, if he stood still, a cabinet, a chair, a bag of potatoes-- anything that belonged where he happened to be. No one had ever *really* noticed him, even in the brightness of noonday. He was not invisible. He was simply unremarkable... which amounted to the same thing.

Beyond that protective faculty, he had no special talents. In fact, the shape Talishada's thoughts had imposed upon him had severely *limited* his abilities. He was not built for speed: ungainly hands and feet made climbing anything but stairs or a sturdy ladder practically impossible; and, large as he was, locked doors were as much a barrier to him as to anyone else. There was little he was capable of that Talishada could not as easily have done herself. Nevertheless, with Oob around, she seldom did much beyond lifting food to her mouth. With him bound to her service, she seldom needed to do anything more.

As she never had the foresight to order him directly to tell her everything it would be to her advantage to know, there was much Oob learned that he kept to himself. He would answer her questions in as few words as possible, relating just the information requested-- nothing more.

He carried out her orders in the same way, doing exactly as commanded. Occasionally, the results were not at all what she had intended. She'd been murderously furious when, having ordered Oob to avenge some slight she'd suffered, saying, "Make that man *squirm*," Oob had done no more than drop a caterpillar down the victim's tunic. The man had squirmed. The result had been exactly what she'd ordered. But for that, Talishada had beaten Oob with a cane for nearly

an hour. Thereafter, her instructions grew much more explicit and ever less open to interpretation.

Oob's *trin* gradually proved an asset; they added a sensitivity shared by no others in this world. He could *bro* Talishada, and know where she was; her general mood (usually foul) also communicated itself to him quite clearly. When she desired his presence, he felt it, as effectively as a command, drawing him to her. For that reason, she never carried out her threat to rip them out off his head.

That he obviously responded to her summons without her having to resort to sorcery increased her curiosity about his strange antennae. She continually questioned him concerning them, learning the terms of their use, but was frustrated at not being able to comprehend the experience.

"Has there ever," she asked late one evening "been an instance of... what would you call it? *Transplant*? Where one of your race, having lost a *trin*, could by spells or medicine have another put on to take its place?"

"Not that I *know* of," he replied in perfect honesty. He did know that it had never been done; but his answer was nonetheless truthful even though his inflection did imply the opposite of what he said. He had his own reasons for wishing her to believe that it might be possible.

"Do you suppose," she'd persisted, as he'd known she would, "someone not of your race might receive *trin* by such means?"

Keeping his face bland, he'd said, "I doubt it." He didn't *have* to say it was impossible, although he very strongly suspected as much.

The idea tantalized her. "There must be a spell," she said, turning through the pages of the sorcerer's book.

"Who can say about sorcery?" he'd replied, off-handedly. "It is impossible to say what magic might accomplish."

"If we had another of your race," she said, "I could experiment."

Oob shuddered at the thought of such an abomination, but knew that his wishes carried no weight. "The spell which brought me here-- at least as I understand it-- limits you to one familiar. If you tried to bring another, I don't know what would happen. I might be returned to my own world. Or I might simply cease to exist. Or perhaps the spell would have no effect at all."

Talishada spent the next several days alone, accepting her meals when they were brought to her by the servants, but asking nothing of her familiar. Rather than being relieved, Oob found her preoccupation ominous.

He spent those same days sitting just outside her door. To all outward appearances, he was a heavy earthenware urn matching the one which had stood for a century on the opposite side of the portal. No one took any notice of him as he crouched against the wall, *trin* tightly focused, while Talishada became alternately excited and frustrated as she pored through the ancient spells.

Convinced that she was quite sincere in her intent to acquire *trin* of her own, Oob knew he must test the limits of his bondage.

He could not lie to her. He could not simply invent an excuse to veer her from her purpose. But...

Talishada had asked, and he'd been forced to admit years before that, yes, he did know of the sorcerer's chambers and, yes, he had been into them. But, he'd hastened to add, quite truthfully he had no wish at all to return. By then, she had come to accept that he could not lie, so her order to him was worded less carefully than it ought to have been. "You'd best stay out of those rooms," she'd said, adding that under no circumstances was he to attempt any sorcery of his own. He'd replied that his aversion to the black arts was such that, without a direct order from her, he doubted that he could be *dragged* down that passageway. And at the time he had said it, it was true. The idea of sorcery had appalled him and he'd avoided that corner of the keep.

But she hadn't said that he

Talishada's Familiar

must not go there, only that he'd *best* not . And that was quite a different thing. He accepted it was *best* that he not enter those rooms, but when he found he had reason to go, there was no force of command in operation to prevent his doing so.

So, at night as Talishada slept, Oob had years before begun studies of his own... not only through that special book, but in the ancient rooms of the sorcerer. Oob hunted for any clue which might lead eventually to freedom.

When Oob had begun his research, it was obvious that Talishada had been through many of the old scrolls and manuscripts; but her search had been solely for means to additional power. She'd skipped carelessly over anything which did not promise greater control over the world around her. The subtleties of magic for its own sake, of learning for the joy of learning, were utterly beyond her.

And so it was that Oob found, at last, a secret he'd hardly dared hope was there. He'd found it in the very book Talashida had studied for so long. And he'd begun to plan in earnest.

Among the scrolls that crowded the countless compartments of the sorcerer's desk, many were blank, intended for recording the results of study. There were bottles of dried-up ink, and tubes which had once held quill pens, though the feathers had long since crumbled to dust.

Oob removed a blank scroll and a jar of ink powder to a closet in the old abandoned kitchen which he'd cleared out for a study of his own. There, by the light of a guttering candle, he mixed water with the powder until it became a serviceable ink. He thinned it carefully until the marks he made appeared dimmed and faded by centuries.

With a fresh goose quill, he began to forge a document he hoped would be sufficiently convincing to his mistress that she would not question it... or *him* ... especially not him. That was the greatest danger: his inability to lie to her. If he but wrote a bit of fiction and she -- on her own-- discovered it, and *believed* it, he would not have lied. Not literally, he told himself. The mistake would be hers and he was under no compulsion to correct *her* misunderstandings.

The moments he could devote to his task were few, due to his never-ending duties.

When he had very nearly finished his manuscript, Talishada surprised him one morning with a request which chilled his blood.

"Oob," she said, her expression grave, "I have instructions for you. You will carry them out, *according to your true understanding of my intent.* You will play no word games to twist my meaning. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mistress," he replied. He'd always been afraid that she'd someday learn how to word her orders; and this command bound him helplessly to obey, however badly she might phrase them. He listened in dread.

"Lady Mansel and Lord Kardu have a daughter of about nine years," Talishada said. "A pretty, adventurous little girl with flaxen hair. Do you know the child I mean?"

"Yes, Mistress," he nodded.

"Several times, this child has wandered away... chasing butterflies, or following a brook to see from whence it came. The entire fortress has been called out to find her, when she has failed to return as expected. So, if she were to disappear, as alarmed as all might be, none would be overly surprised, I'll wager."

Oob held his breath.

"I want you to bring her to me, unseen, bound and gagged. I want no one to hear her cries, nor ever to find aught to lead them *here* in search of her. Take her secretly, so that it will be supposed that she has again merely wandered astray. *No one* is to suspect I had anything to do with her disappearance." The eyes of his mistress narrowed to gleaming slits, burning into him.

"Now, is there anything of my intent that you do not fully understand? Any part of what I mean, of which you have any doubt?"

"I know not what you intend doing with her, once she is here," Oob replied, hating his mistress with all his soul, "but I understand your instructions."

"Good," she nodded. "I promise that you'll suffer for it if I am betrayed. See that she is here this very night. Go!"

Despite having to kidnap the little girl, Oob could not bring himself to do it in a way that would frighten her unnecessarily. He found a sleeping draught amongst Talishada's potions, and went in search of the child.

He came upon her in the sprawling courtyard of the fortress, somewhat apart from the other children playing there. He edged close, and awaited his chance.

Oob had no way of knowing how he appeared to her; only that his true form could not be seen. Several times, she glanced at him, and he held as still as possible. If she perceived him as a stone, it would have been startling indeed, were he to move; but she was not alarmed at his presence. Whatever she saw, she accepted as unremarkable.

A serving wench, returning from the well, was besieged by the children for a drink, and laughingly complied, filling a cup and passing it among them. When Lord Kardu's daughter moved to join the rest, Oob followed. Evidently he was seen then as one of them, for the wench handed it to him as well.

Oob sipped from the cup, released the potion into it, and turned, to give it to his unsuspecting quarry. The little girl's eyes searched his face, perhaps wondering who this new child was; but she accepted the cup from him and drained it.

Minutes later, the girl sat down, slumped, and fell asleep.

Trusting that the spell which hid him would work as well on whatever he carried, he threw his robe over

the child, and lifted her in his arms.

No one seemed to notice, though he passed a number of people on his way to the old kitchen.

Talishada had said, specifically, that the child was to be in her chambers that very *night*. As it was not yet noon, Oob made the girl comfortable in the kitchen closet, confident that she would sleep for many hours, and used the rest of the day to complete his manuscript. He took the finished scroll back down to the sorcerer's study, and laid it carefully among the other writings. He scooped a handful of dust from a corner of the room, and blew it lightly over the ancient parchment. With one finger of each hand, he lifted a heavy length of cobweb from a doorway and draped it across the clustered scrolls. No one would have guessed that they had not lain thus for many years.

Returning to the kitchen closet, Oob most unwillingly bound and gagged the sleeping child, and carried her slowly through the keep and up the tower stairs to Talishada's room.

"Where have you been?" his mistress demanded. "The fortress has been in a turmoil half the day looking for this brat. Where have you kept her?"

"Hidden." Oob replied. "If she had been *here* when they came to tell you of her disappearance, might she not have been found? No one will come here a second time, will they? Was that not your desire, to be safe from suspicion?" He had not lied. If she chose to infer from his questions that he'd kept the child hidden to protect his mistress, that would not be *his* doing.

"She is drugged?" Talishada asked.

"Yes," he nodded. "It prevented both her crying out, and her struggling. Those are a lot of stairs to climb, bearing a squirming bundle that weighs near as much as I do." He deposited the bound child gently onto a soft divan. "What are you going to do with her?"

Talishada looked long at him. "I am going to acquire *trin* of my own. But before I risk damage to myself, I must try it on someone else to see if there be harm."

"HOW?" Oob asked, horrified. "How is it possible?"

As though the child were no more than a bundle of laundry, Talishada pushed her to the floor, and sat upon the divan. "I have found a spell," she said, conversationally. "It allows a sorcerer who has grown old and feeble to exchange his dying heart for that of a younger man, and thereby continue life for a space longer than his allotted time. Or he might exchange his eyes for a better

pair, his... masculine equipment... for a sturdier set. I see no reason why it cannot be used to give me *trin*."

"And what would you exchange for them?" he asked, "seeing that you have not even a feeble pair to give in return."

"I've thought of that." She smiled. "I would take the hair which grows in the spots the *trin* would occupy, twist it into fine plaits, and exchange those braids-- and the skin beneath-- for the tendrils on your head."

" *My* head..." Oob shuddered, even though he'd never doubted whose *trin* she'd confiscate. There were none other to which she had access. "Then, after you learn if this babe survives your trial, whose *trin* do *you* expect to wear?"

"If the spell is successful," she said, as though discussing a picnic in the meadow, "it will require but a second reading for a second exchange. To *my* brow. It should be amusing to leave her with two long plaits of my dark hair among her flaxen locks."

"And I?" Oob asked. "It will amuse you also to leave me as one blind, with two blond braids as my reward? And what if it does not work? What if, for your trouble, all you achieve is a dead familiar?"

"It was a simple process which brought you here." Talishada laughed. "Surely you were not the only inhabitant of your world. You can be easily replaced."

"It can't work," Oob insisted. "*Trin* do not simply sit on the surface of the brow. They are a true extension of the brain. I have seen a bare skull, and it has two small pores, *holes* through the bone, where the fibres which hold the *trin* erect reach through the brow. You have no such pores in your skull! To put *trin* upon your brow will be of no more use to you than if you planted *carrots* on your head. Once you've put them on this child, how will you judge if they are working properly? *I* will no longer be able to tell you, and I doubt you'll find *her* too anxious to be of help to you-- if she would even know how!"

Before Talishada could absorb and analyze the problems he had just outlined, Oob delivered a well-rehearsed, additional comment. Carefully worded, it was literal truth. It implied information which was not true, but in such a way that she'd have no reason to suspect his ulterior motive. He had not thought to be delivering it so soon, and was glad his preparations had been near completed when this necessity arose.

"I was not a man of great learning in my world," he began. "I made no study of our senses, nor of how they worked. I have no way of guessing what was known by others. I *do* know that there were those who tested the senses, their uses and

limitations. How much they've learned in the years since you drew me here, I can hardly say. I suspect there are those who could tell you if such a spell as you intend could really work. Magic is all but unknown in my world, but they certainly know more about *trin* than you. Or I."

"Of what use is that to me?" Talishada retorted, now unsure, and becoming very angry at being unsure. "I have no way of asking them."

"It seems to me," Oob replied, cautiously, weighing each word for its truth, "that if there is a spell to enable you to open my world and drag me here, there really *ought* to be a spell which would allow you to merely *look* into that world... perhaps speak across the barrier which holds our worlds apart."

In all honesty, Oob felt that there *should be* such a spell; and though he did not believe it existed, it was obviously true that Talishada *could not* know for certain that such a spell was not among the countless books and scrolls in that centuries-old library.

"You're right," she admitted. "But I suspect you tell me this less to aid me in my intentions, than to save your own *trin*."

"No," he said, leaving her to draw her own conclusions. The truth was that, while he certainly had no wish to be deprived of one of his senses, his major concern was the safety of the innocent child he'd been forced to abduct; a motive which would not have occurred to Talishada. Having no compassion of her own, she did not understand it in others.

In irritation she paced about her luxurious quarters, her slim, nearly nude body taut with unreleased tension. She'd found the courage to risk something that she knew would be dangerous on many levels, and now she was balked, on the very verge of taking that step. Indecisiveness gnawed at her, and Oob sat quietly, not wishing to be the object upon which she vented her frustration.

"Very well," she snapped, suddenly turning on her heel to face him. "We will go down there and look. Yes, *we!*" she emphasized, seeing his protest coming. "It is your idea. You will help me search. And your gods help you if you place stumbling blocks in my path! There are a number of spells-of-suffering I have not yet tested. Don't give me a reason to." She gestured toward the sleeping child. "Bring her."

Oob could hardly suppress a smile. Talishada had fallen for his ruse. His only disappointment was that he could not leave the little girl behind. He'd hoped she might waken, struggle loose from her bonds, and escape. But there was still reason to hope that his mistress would have too much to occupy her, to be overly concerned about her captive.

In the laboratory where the mage had worked his spells, were lanterns faced with thick ruby glass. Talishada seemed drenched in blood by their garish glow, and the stone walls, painted with gore. A serpentine mandala carved into one wall, touched by the flickering luminescence, appeared to move as if imbued with sentient life. The jewels set into it gleamed balefully, and the dark hollows of the strange carven skull at its center held intimations of awful awareness.

The laboratory reeked of evil; but Oob volunteered to begin his search there, in order to steer Talishada into the library.

The child slept near the door, his folded robe pillowing her head while Oob methodically went through the scrolls and books, hardly registering what it was his eyes scanned. All his senses were attuned to catch any indication that his mistress had found what he'd left for her to find.

It was coming on toward morning when a long, drawn-out "Aaaaah" told him that it had happened. He continued turning the brittle leaves of a crumbling volume until Talishada stepped to the door and said, almost sweetly, "Oob, come in here and see what I've discovered."

Her tone was so at odds with the hour, the place, and their purpose, that he feared she'd recognized his handiwork. But he soon realized her smiles were genuine. She'd found what she believed to be an answer to her problem *and* she envisioned that its application might prove most unpleasant for her familiar. She obviously enjoyed that prospect.

He'd known she would, and thus had carefully written into it such dire hints. Also, he hoped that because of the promised pain to himself, she'd never suspect his part in its creation.

"See this," she said, holding up the scroll before him. Its edges crumbled as she unrolled it. All of the care of which he'd been capable was necessary, when he wrote upon it, to prevent its deteriorating beneath his fingers. "I can send you back to your world," she smiled, "to ask the questions and obtain the answers I need. It is possible!"

Oob almost sneered. "And what makes you think, My Lady, that once beyond your reach I would ever return to give you that information? In my world, I'd no longer be your familiar. You might again open the way, but there's little chance-- of all the people in that world-- that I would a second time be the one you'd catch."

"Well," she mused, a smile dimpling the corners of her mouth, "perhaps you'd come back if I threatened to dismember this child if you did not."

Oob gazed down at the beautiful little girl by the doorway, just visible in the red light. "I would hate to know that she had died. But I never *would* know. There's no way I could. So there'd be little point in taking revenge against *me*, on *her*. Once I left here, this entire world and everyone in it would seem little more than a bad dream. I shouldn't care long about this child, when there was nothing my caring could do for her."

That was true; he *shouldn't*. But he would.

"I am your *familiar*, My Lady. And I've had a number of years to

become familiar with who and what you are. We know each other. We have few secrets. And if I did come back, I have little reason to believe you'd keep an oath not to harm her, beyond the next time you got angry at me. Honor is not in you, unless you are more secretive than I believe you capable of being. I do not insult you, Mistress; I tell you truth."

"Truth could be expressed with more tact, little monster," Talishada hissed, stung by his words. "But I do not need to bribe your obedience. This scroll tells me how I may command it. I'll send you home on a tight leash, like a dog, and drag you back whenever I choose. You'll do as I say because I will still be your mistress, and you will yet be my obedient slave.

"This scroll is the *reverse* of the spell which brought you here, my cat-faced hop-toad. This will be agony like a babe giving birth to itself. You'll feel as though you are being turned inside-out. I will push you screaming through the small end of the funnel into which you fell, and squeeze you until your bones turn soft as butter in the sun."

She sat back upon the edge of the sorcerer's desk, her face filmed in perspiration. "You'll do my bidding, little troll, and do it well, if only to escape the certainty that if you do not, I'll keep sending you through that torturous portal until you do. And I'll *love* every moment of it."

She's as excited as a bride, Oob thought. *The idea of torturing me has her heart as wild as though she were awaiting a lover.*

"Go back up to my room," she ordered, "as quickly as possible, and bring down the old book. Let nothing detain you, nor anything happen to that book. Or I'll remove your fingers and toes with a nutcracker, one joint at a time."

* * *

Thus it was that Oob now walked that long corridor, carrying the heavy tome, fearful that his plans might yet go awry. With all her faults, his mistress was not stupid, and it was quite possible that she had read the cautions and warnings in the book when she had first found it. There were dire possibilities listed for every spell it contained. From one such warning, in fact, he had gotten his idea.

It was so long ago that Talishada had worked the enchantment that had brought him here, Oob hoped she'd not remember all of its details... hoped that, perhaps, she had not even turned to those final pages to see if any warnings applied to the spell she intended to pronounce.

Once he was certain he understood all of the convoluted implications in its complex wording, he'd laboriously rubbed the old parchment with a stone until those lines had disappeared. If his mistress had not already seen the warning, she *never* would.

Nearing the old study, he *broed* her and shuddered at the sadistic delight in her anticipation of what she believed would be the tortures of hell for her familiar.

More worrisome, the child was awakening, whimpering in her bonds, wondering where she was and why she could not move. Oob wished he'd given her a stronger draught, for Talishada would not respond kindly to being disturbed by a crying child.

He went directly to the pitiful bundle, solicitously murmuring that everything would be all right. He had no idea what the little girl perceived him to be, only hoped that whatever his appearance she'd be comforted by it.

Talishada knelt upon the stone floor and opened the book. Oob's eyes grew wide in wonder. In this special room, the ancient parchment glowed with a light of its own that dispelled the ruddy gloom. It reflected from the jewels his mistress wore, gleamed from polished metal and golden skin. He could almost see the power of those faded words, rising like wisps of smoke.

Carefully, with a bit of chalk, Oob's mistress copied onto the stone floor the same design in which he'd first made his appearance; but this time her work was more tedious, as the pattern had to be entirely reversed.

Several times, Talishada glanced irritably at the whimpering child, and rubbed out portions with the heel of her hand to curve a line in the opposite direction.

Finally, following a painstaking last inspection, she was satisfied. For this spell no incense was required. She lifted a coil of stout cord from the table, and smiled. "While you were retrieving the book, I wove this for you."

"For me?" Oob asked.

"Your leash!"

He submitted, as she knotted one end of the cord about his neck. It was a precise and complex knot, according to instructions he himself had written. The other end of the cord was knotted about her own wrist.

"You shall not jerk free once you are there," she said. "Any attempt and I shall pull you back. Then the painful passage must be endured again."

She directed him where to stand within the chalked circle, and this time stepped within it herself. She opened the heavy book, and began the incantation.

Twice, as she carefully pronounced the words in reverse order, she was distracted by the child's whimpering. Her eyes glared rage and frustration.

Oob was helpless. He had been ordered to stand still and be quiet. There was nothing he could do, though inwardly he writhed. He had never planned on the child being present. Indeed, even if his scheme worked, the little girl's survival, trussed up in an unknown chamber, was far from assured.

As the spell progressed, he could feel a tightening in the air, a force, like a living web, weaving itself about both him and Talishada, a glimmering net shrinking in upon them.

Suddenly, a shriek echoed from the stone walls. The captive child, rubbing her chin against her shoulder, had dragged the gag from her mouth. "Let me go!" she cried, in mixed fear and outrage. "What are you doing? My father will slap you good if you don't let me go! He

Talishada's Familiar

will!"

There was nothing remotely pretty nor girlish about Talishada's iron-hard face. Her shoulders shook, betraying her tension, as she turned a few pages in the book. Then extending a hand toward the little girl, she began to read.

A silent scream built in Oob's throat, as he stood, held silent and powerless by Talishada's orders. He watched in utter horror as the child ceased her furious threats.

The girl's eyes widened as an unseen something enveloped her, and her firm, healthy young face grew taut, shrinking upon the bones... and darkening like old leather... drying and cracking. The cords which bound her hung loose, as the body beneath them diminished.

A faint mist moved in the air above her still form. Oob realized, with a sick sorrow, that it was moisture from the little girl's body... all the moisture it had contained. When it dissipated, there lay the desiccated remains of what moments before had been a living creature, now in appearance the most ancient relic in this chamber.

Lady Mansel and Lord Kardu would search in vain for their only daughter; for should they, by some miracle, chance upon what was left of her, it was unlikely they would ever guess that they had found her.

Oob stared at his mistress, as he might a loathsome, slime-covered worm which had crawled out of a corpse. His scheme *must* work-- if only to ensure that he would never again feel the guilt and shame of being a part of her evil deeds.

She smiled grimly at his naked hatred and turned back to the page from which she had been reading before the interruption, and started again.

Oob closed his eyes.

Once more, the tingling in the air built about them, slowly, the tension becoming all but unbearable as the last of the spell– the first, in reverse– was spoken.

There was a feeling of falling an immense distance, of unseen lights bursting about him. His body ballooned, inflated... growing to the proportions it had once known. He did not cry out; it was Talishada who screamed. She who had expected no part in that journey, opened her eyes to see before her a figure like she had sometimes dreamed: tall, naked, superbly built, as blonde as Lord Kardu's daughter had been, and so handsome it took her breath away to behold him. From this being's brow, two jewel-tipped tendrils curved.

He took the ancient book of spells from her, and smiled... a dazzling, but somehow ironic smile. "So, Talishada," he said, in a voice she knew. "I am home. Welcome to *my* world."

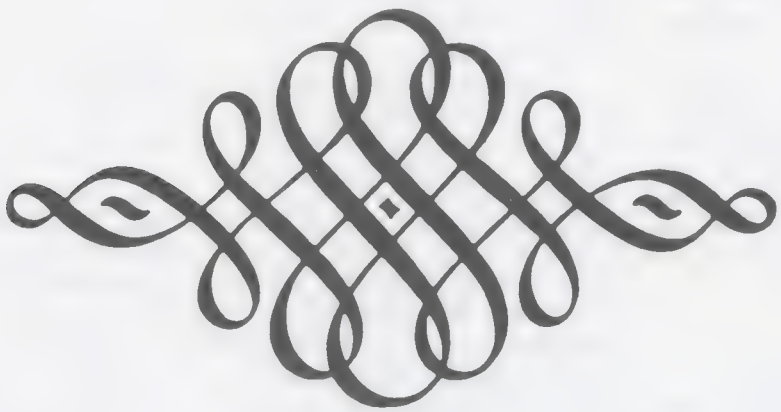
This was Oob? This god-like being was the creature she'd seen as a misshapen, cat-headed dwarf? Talishada, who never in her life had felt the need of romance, was now in love, as desperately as any fourteen-year-old in the flush of awakened maturity. She was glad of her beauty.

Oob no longer wore the noose she'd knotted about his neck. It was looped, instead, upon his wrist; and the other end... She raised her hand, and screamed.

She closed her eyes in disbelief, feeling of her face. The noose was about her neck.

"Yes, you did reverse the spell" Oob said. "You now wear the form you imposed upon me... or a vaguely female version of it. You have traded the beauty you never deserved, for a shape still more pleasing than should rightfully be yours. Now, Talishada, *you* are the familiar. And you will obey me."

George Barr



Darrell Schweitzer Interviews

GEORGE BARR

George Barr's brightly-colored and beautifully rendered paintings have been dazzling science fiction and fantasy fans for decades now, as have his superb black & white illustrations, many of which have graced the pages of Asimov's, Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, Amazing Stories, *and* Weird Tales, *among others. He is best known for his paperback work, particularly a series he painted for* DAW Books, *which included several* Darkover *novels. A splendid collection of paintings and drawings entitled* Upon the Winds of Yesterday, *was published by Donald M. Grant in 1976. In the foreword, fellow artist Tim Kirk makes the sensible assessment that George Barr, painter, illustrator, writer, musician, singer, costume designer, and so forth, "is one of the few true, authentic Renaissance men left on this planet."*

One can only agree.

Q: Is your story in the current issue of *MZB's Fantasy Magazine* your first published fiction?

Barr: Under my own name, yes.

Q: In the introduction to your book, Kirk mentions a body of fiction, largely unpublished—

Barr: Yes. I've been writing all my life, just as I've been drawing.

Q: Why have we not seen a story before now?

Barr: I guess I made a decision a number of years ago that the writing would be for my own amusement. The art I would make a living at.

Q: But isn't this like doing a painting and not showing it to anyone?

Barr: The thing is, when you finish a painting, you've got the results to show somebody. But everything I write is handwritten. If you don't get it typed up into manuscript form, you can't show it to anybody. And I type with one finger...

Q: Is the process of creativity—what's going on in your head—the same for writing and for painting?

Barr: For me they're very different. When I'm doing artwork, it's almost always inspired by and directly attributable to someone else's stories. So I read the work and get my ideas from that; where with writing, I write merely because I've got an idea in my head and it won't go away. I write it down to get rid of it.

GEORGE BARR

Q: Why not paint it?

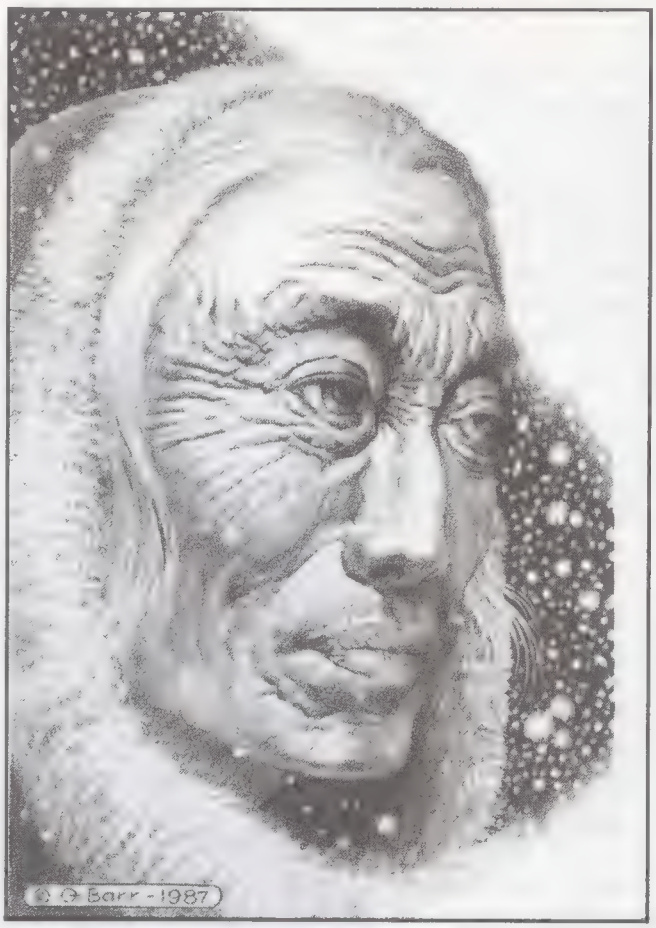
Barr: I've done that too. But I don't generally have that much extra time I can spend with painting—but I can write in the bathroom.

Q: What is the occasion then that you actually produced a story for publication in this issue?

Barr: Jan saw a picture on my wall and said, "This would make a good cover." I said, "But I thought you didn't use cover art that didn't relate to a story." Jan said, "So write one." And a few days later I gave her a story to go with it.

Q: On the strength of this success, are you going to publish more stories?

Barr: I will continue to write, sure, and I submit stories on occasion. I haven't had an awful lot of success so far. I could show you a stack of rejection slips.



Q: The earliest work of yours I've seen are a few paintings dated 1959, and an occasional illustration in George Scithers's Robert E. Howard fanzine *Amra* that far back—

Barr: Oh yes. I was in my infancy then. *(Laughs)*

Q: According to Stuart Schiff in the introduction to ***Upon the Winds of Yesterday,*** your first artistic creation was on a piece of wrapping paper on the floor, when you were really in your infancy.

Barr: Yes, that's true. Newsprint, not wrapping paper.

Q: But this particular masterpiece has perished.

Barr: *(Laughs)* Fortunately, yes.

Q: At what age did you decide that you were actually going to make a career out of painting?

Barr: I don't know that it was ever actually a decision. It was just that when it came to the point where I had to make a living, drawing was a skill that I had, that I didn't have to go somewhere and train to acquire. Anything else that I might have decided to do, I would have had to have learned how.

Q: You did have some art training though, technical school or something?

Barr: I went for a year and a half to a vocational school in Salt Lake City which had a commercial art class and I started the Famous Artists' Correspondence School, but I didn't finish it.

Q: Did you from the beginning aspire to illustrate science fiction and fantasy?

Barr: Yes. Definitely. As soon as I discovered science fiction, when I was about thirteen years old, I knew that was my world.

Q: Did you submit artwork then?

Barr: No. I really didn't know how. It was just one of those things that I thought would someday happen. When fandom and I discovered each other about 1958, the art shows at the conventions were just getting started, and that's what kicked it off.

Q: Then you had a couple of covers on *Fantastic* in 1962.

Barr: Yes, and they were sold as a direct result of having been exhibited at one of the science fiction conventions.

Q: After that, we don't see much of your work in the professional magazines for several years.

Barr: No. I was living in Salt Lake City at the time and freelancing for advertising agencies.

Q: Were you still exhibiting work in shows and maintaining your contacts with fandom?

Barr: But I was submitting to fanzines all over the country.

Q: But not to *Fantastic* anymore?

Barr: No. I was perfectly willing to do anything they sent me to do, but I hadn't yet learned, at that point, that I had to keep reminding them that I was still alive. I just sat back and thought, "Well, now they know I'm here. They can send me something." And they didn't.

Q: Could you describe how, say, a cover painting for a magazine develops from an initial idea to a finished product?

Barr: Generally, it starts with the story that the magazine has sent me to illustrate. I'll read it through, take notes on the characters, the setting, the scenes, so that I get the details right so far as the author has written them, then use my imagination to fill in all the blanks.

Then I'll do three to five rough preliminaries and send these to the editor, and let the editorial staff make their choice and give their recommendations for changes. Then I'll do a finished piece on it.

Q: Do you go from pencil sketch to color sketch to finished painting, or what?

Barr: Yes, in those three steps.

Q: You've also done some interesting things with ballpoint pens, including an amazing full-color "painting" reproduced in *Upon the Winds of Yesterday*. Do you do that sort of work anymore?

Barr: Oh, ballpoint pen work yes, constantly. Jan insists that I mention that it is the Accountant's Fine Point Pen. *(Laughs)* I started working with a ballpoint pen in high school in Salt Lake City, because my teacher Jack Vigos told me to sketch in pen rather than in pencil, so I would learn not to depend on an eraser; I erased too often. Ballpoint pens were just coming into popularity then, and they were easier to use than a fountain pen which you had to keep refilling. So it was just a skill that developed over a long period of years sketching with it.

Q: Is the color then entirely a matter of different pens, or do you touch up the piece with paint?

Barr: I haven't used colored ballpoint pens in almost twenty years. I can't find them on the market anymore. They're not available in the variety of colors they used to be; and it gave me the world's worst case of writer's cramp to do an entire picture in colored ballpoint. So basically what I do now is a detailed drawing in black ballpoint pen which is then painted over in full-color watercolors.

Q: You did achieve some extraordinary color effects with just the color pens.

Barr: They were a lot of fun, and I did a number of pieces. I stopped finally when I went to the Lindy Pen Company and tried to sell them on the idea of an advertising scheme appealing to artists. They were very nice and they said that what I had done was impressive, but nobody else in the world would be able to do it.

Q: Are any of the other professional artists in our field using ballpoint?

Barr: Alicia Austin did some black and white pieces using ballpoint pens a number of years ago. They were quite beautiful; and Steven Leialoha has done some that were very impressive.

Q: If you had your choice, what would you most like to illustrate? Suppose you had an unlimited budget to produce the definitive illustrated edition of—something.

Barr: I think it would probably be Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. It's a book I fell in love with when I was about five years old, discovering it after having seen the movie. It's something that someday I intend to do a fully-illustrated version of.

Q: Do you think anyone will back you on that?

Barr: I would certainly welcome that opportunity, but I'll do it whether they do or not.

Q: How much time does a professional artist have for labors of love like this?

Barr: Very, very little. I think maybe in the last year I did one piece simply because I wanted to do it. It is the cover of this magazine.

Q: Do you ever miss the freedom you must have had as a fan artist?

Barr: To a certain extent, but I am also very glad of the fact that I don't have to sit and rack my brains to think up an idea to draw, because the story that I'm illustrating provides that.

Q: By way of labors of love, do you think you'll ever go back to your incomplete comic-strip adaptation of Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword*?

Barr: Probably not. I would have to unlearn an awful lot to get back to the technique and style I was using then.

Q: Suppose a publisher came to you and said, "Finish it and we'll do it as a book." What would happen?

Barr: It has happened, and I said, "Thank you, but no thank you."

Q: Do you have plans in that area—graphic novels and comic strips, as opposed to illustration?

Barr: No, that's never been a line I've aimed for. The only reason I did *The Broken Sword* is because Tom Reamy, who was the editor of *Trumpet* magazine at the time, begged me to do it. I had never done anything like it. The three installments that I did taught me how much work it was. Then *Trumpet* stopped publication, and in a way I was rather grateful, because it gave me an excuse to stop doing something which had been an incredible amount of unpaid work.

Q: Do you feel it was still worth it?

Barr: I don't know. I learned a lot from it, but I would never do it again.

Q: Who are your favorites among other illustrators, either presently active or of the past?

Barr: Of the past, Virgil Finlay obviously—I derive an awful lot from him—H.W. MacCauley, Hannes Bok. Among present illustrators, I'm very enthusiastic about Steve Fabian's work. I think he's one of the best that the field has ever produced. And, oh, Michael Whelan, of course, and Kelly Freas whom I would consider a master. He was illustrating when I first discovered the genre. I think of him as past, present, future.

Q: Do you find there are any serious limitations that the field places on you? For instance, if you had been born twenty years earlier and had aspired to do covers for *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Planet Stories*, you would be required to render lots of flesh tones and draw measuring cups and I'm not sure much else would even be allowed...

Barr: (Laughs) And I'd have loved it.

Q: Are there any similar limitations today?

Barr: One of the limitations is that I can't do that kind of thing anymore. It is very seldom that anyone will allow me to do the kind of picture that first attracted me to the field. *The Startling Stories* and *Planet Stories* covers were just marvelous to me, and I would dearly love to make a career doing that kind of thing, but it's not being done now.

Q: There was always your poster for the movie *Flesh Gordon*.

Barr: Yes, there was that.

GEORGE BARR

Q: Didn't you have some input into the visual look of that movie?

Barr: I designed a couple of the animated creatures in the film, but other than that, not specifically. I was working with the whole crew that was doing the sets and the scenery, so there was a lot of cross-influence, but the sets and the designs were pretty well established by the time I got involved. I was asked to do the makeup in it, but my makeup experience was mostly limited to stage work and I didn't feel I had the expertise. So I recommended Bjo Trimble for it, and she got the job.

Q: But the poster was still an opportunity to do old-fashioned, pulp-style art.

Barr: Yes, and I've gotten several jobs because of that poster. People have seen it and looked me up.

Q: What are you doing just now?

Barr: Most of my time is being spent on *Dungeons & Dragons* material for *TSR*, Inc. I'm not into games and don't know that much about them. But it's all adventure fantasy, so when they tell me what they want me to draw, I draw it. For the last couple of years they've provided most of my income.

Q: Are you still doing *DAW* covers?

Barr: No. I haven't done a cover for *DAW* in five or six years.

Q: Have you been doing other paperback covers?

Barr: There is one in the process of publication right now. They're using the dustjacket painting I did for Dick Lupoff's *Countersolar!* for the paperback edition. And I just finished a paperback cover for a historical detective story set in ancient Egypt. It's not a fantasy.

Q: What's the book?

Barr: *Dog-Headed Death* by Ray Faraday Nelson. It's being published by Strawberry Hill.

Q: What is your advice to new and would-be artists?

Barr: Oh, that would be difficult. I'd say, draw. Draw and keep drawing, especially people. Learn to draw the human figure. Learn to draw faces and expressions. Learn to draw beautiful women and handsome men, because no matter how well you can do rocketships or landscapes, sooner or later people will come into it. Artists who can't do human figures find themselves extremely limited.

Q: Having learned to draw, how does the would-be artist get his work seen?

Barr: I would recommend the convention artshows, especially Worldcon, Westercon and Norwescon—the biggest ones in the country, because the professional editors attend them and see what's there. Then send out samples and let them know you're available.

Q: It used to be the popular wisdom that one couldn't make it as an illustrator unless one lived in New York, because you couldn't go in at a moment's notice to confer with art directors. I can think of one recently defunct magazine in our field which, the exaggerated rumor had it, only used artists who lived in Manhattan. Obviously untrue, but do you experience any disadvantage being in California?

Barr: Advantages and disadvantages. If I were living in New York I would have to be doing a lot more work than I am now simply to be able to afford to live there. I could burn myself out very quickly. I decided that living in New York was simply too high a price to pay for success, so I decided to stay here. If I had to do a lot more work, I'm not sure where I would sandwich it in. The only way my life could be better now would be if I could do the same amount of work and get paid three or four times as much for it.

Q: Are you still doing private commissions?

Barr: Very seldom. Occasionally something comes along that is interesting enough or they offer enough.

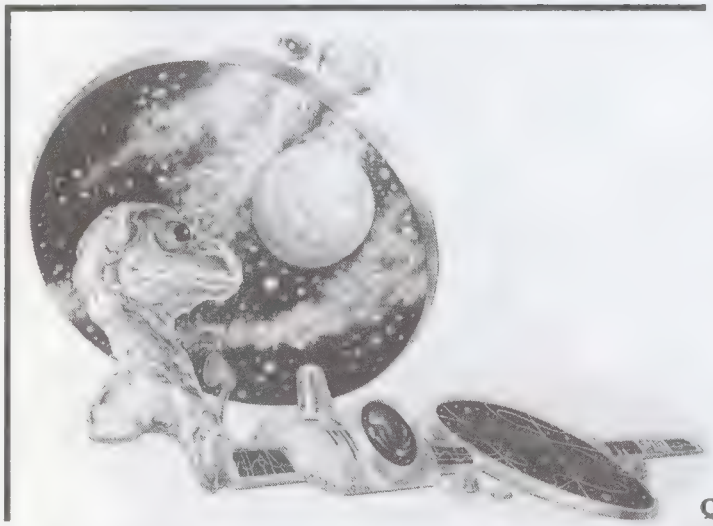
Q: Was this sort of work interesting, or merely something you did because you got paid for it?

Barr: It was both. I enjoyed it very much, especially the fantasy portraits I've had a chance to do. They were a lot of fun.

Q: What would happen if you were assigned something to illustrate which was really terrible, and didn't excite you at all?

Barr: That has happened, and I've chickened out and done it anyway.

Q: Do you just fall back on technique when there's no inspiration to be had?



Barr: Sometimes the problem is not the fact that there is no inspiration, but that the story is so bad, I feel sincerely that it doesn't deserve publication. I told a publisher this once, and he told me in no uncertain terms that he had come to me for a cover, not for a review. I felt very guilty doing my very best to paint a cover to help sell a book I didn't feel was worth the $1.25 they were charging.

Q: Was the book a success?

Barr: As far as I know, it was. I don't accept much from my father, but I fell back on something he told me years ago. He was on a job doing electrical work...he was a construction man. He found out that the building he was working on was a red-light house. He said he had to tell himself he was being paid for the electrical work. What they did with the building afterwards was none of his business.

Q: I'm sure that even the most uninteresting commission is a great relief in a hungry season.

Barr: Oh, yes. I appreciate it when people contact me about these jobs—covers, interior illustrations, or private commissions—because there will occasionally be a week or two when I don't have anything scheduled, and the bills come whether I have anything or not.

Q: How are working conditions for artists nowadays? I know they've improved considerably since the pulp era, when the publisher would be more likely to give a piece away to someone who wrote an interesting letter to the magazine—or do just about anything with it rather than give it back to the artist. But there must be a lot of little things I don't see.

Barr: A lot of that depends on who you are, and how long you've been working in the business. Fortunately now I can tell a publisher, "I'm selling you first publication rights only." They generally accept it. But a few years ago I tried that, and I was told, "Well, we can get somebody else." One editor made the point that, while he was returning my art work, it was only because he wanted to, not because he had to.

Q: In other words, gun-point benevolence.

Barr: That's a good phrase. *(Laughs)*

Q: That surprises me. I had thought that everyone returned original art nowadays.

Barr: I suspect his policy has changed because he's using some artists who I know would not accept that.

Q: Isn't it true that, with the possible exception of westerns, science fiction and fantasy represent the only area where the art has any resale value. So maybe most publishers regard the original art for a paperback cover the way a toothpaste manufacturer would the graphic design for a tube of toothpaste.

Barr: That's what I've heard, yes. I've seen some romance covers that are beautiful, and I can well imagine someone wanting to hang them on their wall, but I haven't the foggiest idea where you'd go to buy them.

Q: So in fantasy, you are fortunate to have a double income.

Barr: Yes. That's true, and I depend on it a good deal. For almost every piece I do, I figure that the resale will double the amount of money I get from it.

Q: Would you then ever consider going into other areas of art, such as, say, children's books?

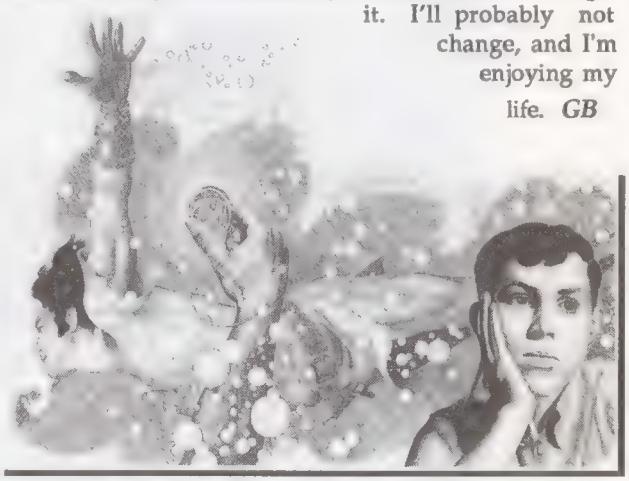
Barr: I'd love to do children's books. But I just haven't investigated the field. I haven't had the time.

Q: But science fiction and fantasy is still the most satisfying area?

Barr: It's what I've wanted. The only thing that could drive me out of it would be if no one would buy my work.

Q: You seem to be doing quite well. But if you had it all to do over again, can you think of any way you would have handled your career differently?

Barr: I would have started earlier, and bypassed the ten years in advertising, and I would have tried to work up a good deal more gumption. I'm not an assertive person. Most of the time I have sat back and waited for opportunities for success to come to me rather than going out and beating the bushes and hunting for them. Therefore more assertive people have come along, a good deal younger than I, and passed me up, getting considerably more for their work...a lot more exposure. But deservedly so because they've worked so hard to get it. I'll probably not change, and I'm enjoying my life. *GB*



UNDER THE SKIN

by Deborah Wheeler

It could have been a mugging, or some kid on dope roughing up a wino, but when she paused before the darkened alley on the humid July night, something in her guts went *zing!* and Jodie Marshall knew another woman was in trouble and needed her help. She stepped beyond the Hollywood street lights and saw two bodies wrestling between the trash cans. Without thinking of the danger she might be putting herself in, Jodie dropped her sweat-soaked karate *gi*, rolled in its black belt, and sprinted towards them.

She could not see much more of the man than his back and a thatch of hair, but she did not need to in order to know what was going on. He hunched over his victim, pinning her legs apart with his knees. The woman beneath him moaned, a hoarse, almost animal sound. Her white thighs shone in the darkness.

Jodie's first kick, a sweeping roundhouse with all the power of *kiai* she could generate, caught the man across the back of his kidneys. Breath burst from him as his spine arched reflexively. His neck snapped back to meet her knife-hand at the base of his skull.

The man's head thwacked against the cracked pavement, bounced, and then lolled from a limp body. Jodie clung to him like a limpet as he fell, and then slid her fingers around to the front of his neck, digging through the layers of muscle for his carotid arteries. The pulse under her fingers felt strong and vital. She wondered what it would be like to press just a little harder...

It would be so easy, wouldn't it? No one would ever know it hadn't happened accidentally during the fight. Just a little more pressure, and the elastic walls of the blood vessels would bend inwards, bend and finally collapse...

Temptation swept through Jodie like a wave of sexual heat. She sweated with wanting it.

The heart itself, now so arrogant in life, would begin to falter, beat by beat growing slower and less regular. Then stillness, blessed peace, one less monster to prowl the darkness, giving women nightmares they would carry for the rest of their lives. His brain might cry out as it squandered the last of its precious oxygen supply, but it would be a silent cry. She would never hear it, not even in her dreams. Now she had the chance she'd longed for these past ten years, the chance to get back at those bastards for what they did to Sherry.

Just a few more moments...

The woman moaned again and pushed herself up on one elbow, her face hidden beneath a tangle of darkness.

"C'mon, we've got to get out of here." Jodie lifted the woman by one slender wrist. Her skin was marble cool under Jodie's fingers, her bones light and fragile as a bird's.

"I'll take you to the hospital--you might be hurt and not realize it. Adrenalin does that to you--" Jodie hurried her out of the alley, pausing only to scoop up her *gi*.

"No hospital. No police," the woman said, in a low, heavily accented voice. She sounded Russian or Polish, not Hispanic, but Jodie

could not place her origin.

"You can't let that creep walk away, not after what he did. The next woman he jumps might not be so lucky--she might end up dead."

With a start, Jodie realized that she was talking too fast and her fingertips ached from pressing against the woman's arm. She released her grip. It wasn't the woman's fault that she had been brainwashed into taking whatever this sexist society dumped on her. Or maybe there was another reason.

"You don't want the authorities to know about you? Are you an illegal or something?"

The woman's face glimmered in the artificial light--huge shadowed eyes, pointed chin, wine-dark lips. "I need only a place to rest."

"I can't just leave you here." Jodie pointed to her rusted Honda parked at the curbside. "You can stay with me for a few days."

The woman slid into the front passenger seat. "I shall not overstay my welcome. A few days, as you say."

Jodie unlocked both locks to her one-bedroom apartment. "C'mon in, sit anywhere, What's your name, by the way?"

"Mary Smith."

"Look, I don't care who you really are, or why you want to stay hidden--" Jodie flicked on the lights. "And if you're dealing, I don't want to know about it. But we've got to call the cops on this."

Mary Smith sat on the tattered sofa covered with an old chenille bedspread. "What good would that do?"

"For one thing, the creep could still be lying there and they'll take him in. Even if you don't press charges, he'll spend the night locked up instead of assaulting the next woman he comes across. Also, for the record, so the cops will start believing us about the frequency of rape around here. Every unreported attack puts us that much further from decent protection."

"As you wish, but it will do no good."

She was right. The duty officer sniggered, "You did *what* to him and left him *how?*" and refused to take the report without Jodie's name.

Christ, another bozo who doesn't believe women can fight back, Jodie thought as she hung up.

The next morning, Mary Smith was gone. After Jodie dressed for work at the local women's bookstore, she headed for her favorite coffee shop. She was low on funds, as usual, but after last night, she deserved a meal she didn't have to cook herself.

"Hi, Stell." Jodie slid onto a stool at the counter and picked up the copy of the *Los Angeles Times* which the last customer had abandoned. "How's life in the old roach coach?"

"And to you too, Jo. The usual?"

"No, the special, and the coffee up front, please. I had the strangest night--Hey! Look at this!"

The waitress craned her neck to read the page Jodie laid flat on the counter.

"Some creep got bumped off in an alley,"Stell said. "Since when is that news, in Hollywood? It says they figure he was a rapist because his dong was out. Serves the bastard right."

But he was alive when I left him. I swear he was! Maybe some doper rolled him for his wallet and it had nothing to do with me. But if I hadn't left him there...

Christ, he had it coming. One less macho pig in the universe.

He deserved prison, he didn't deserve to die...

Jodie bent over her coffee, feeling the warmth seep through her fingers grown suddenly cold. She had wanted him dead in the height of her fury. But she had stopped herself from acting on it.

Or had she?

Jodie set down one of the two bags of groceries she carried, unlocked the door to her apartment, and pushed the bag inside with one foot. The reading light over the one comfortable chair was on, and Mary Smith sat there, her legs tucked underneath her. The incandescent light gave her cheeks a faint rosy glow, setting off her dark, upswept hair. Instead of the torn clothing of the night before, she wore a creamy blouse, obviously silk, and black velvet pants. Looking at her, Jodie would never have guessed she'd been the victim of an attempted rape less than twenty-four hours before. Two expensive-looking suitcases lay in the corner beside the orange-crate bookshelves.

Mary looked up from the book she was reading. "My friend! How glad I am to see you!"

"Can you give me a hand with these groceries?" Jodie mumbled. "I'm sorry, I've only shopped for one. I didn't know if you'd still be here."

Mary got up from the chair in a movement that would stir envy in a dancer. As she took the bag, Jodie smelled her perfume, a dry spicy scent, unfamiliar and disturbing. Mary laughed. "I did not expect you to feed me, too! I will put these things away for you--yes, let me do just this little thing. You have done so much for me already."

In the bathroom, Jodie pulled off her clothes and stepped into the shower. The hot water beating on her shoulders helped relax the iron tension of the day. She lost track of time, for when she had dried and dressed, she found the living room empty. She wolfed down a frozen dinner, flipped the TV on and off a few times and finally tumbled into bed.

The dream began as an ordinary residue of the day's events, but soon Jodie found herself walking down a cold, deserted hallway, peering into one doorway after another. As light faded into shadow, colors took on a strange new richness and all her senses grew sharper. A sudden breeze brought waves of intoxicating scents; her own heartbeat and the gentle whisper of air in her lungs seemed more powerful than

an ocean storm.

At the last doorway, she stopped and looked down at her hands, to find them spattered with blood. But instead of horrifying her, the sight and smell filled her with an almost orgasmic ecstasy.

She woke up in a cold sweat.

The next morning, Jodie awakened feeling as if she'd been on a three-day drunk, her body sodden and unresponsive as she lurched out of bed. She ran cold water down the back of her neck and then scrubbed her teeth while she stared into the mirror. *You did kill him. That's what your subconscious was trying to tell you last night. How are you going to live with this?*

Jodie decided to make the nine a.m. karate workout, even if it meant losing a few hours of work. Her boss wouldn't object, and she badly needed the mind-clearing exercise. She dug out a fresh *gi* and her belt. The stitched black fabric was gray with wear along the edges.

We are taught to revere life, never to use our art for aggression, or fight to achieve selfish ends. How could I have turned away from everything I believe in, for one moment of insanity?

The class was small, and Jodie was the only woman present. Normally this didn't bother her, although she had gotten some harsh comments from friends who felt that a woman of her rank owed it to her sisters to work out only with other women. Some of the men had an ego problem about a woman who was their rank superior, and occassionally she had to "accidentally" bloody a few noses during sparring. As *sensei* led them through the solo *kata* exercises, Jodie worked out next to a barrel-chested man named Steve Azusa. Although he smiled hello as usual, white teeth shining in his dark-complected face, she did not return his greeting with her usual glare of, *What do you think I am, some second-class plaything*? She remembered he was a cop, a detective sergeant with the L.A.P.D.

There's no scarlet letter on your forehead, no token of what you've done, Jodie told herself, clinging desperately to her concentration. *It's only your own conscience that says he can see right through you. And why should you care what he thinks? He's probably an arrogant s.o.b. like the rest of them.*

Jodie finished the workout with a long round of sparring with Steve. She forgot her doubts, forgot the misery of not knowing if she was really a killer. All she saw was his face, as closed and set as her own as she blocked his moves and spun to counter-attack. Her hands and feet were not bone and flesh, but hammers, knives, claws, as bereft of emotion as the tools they resembled.

Finally, *sensei* drew class together for the closing meditation. Jodie sat on her knees, *seiza*, and felt her heartbeat calm, her thoughts grow still. *Sensei* clapped three times to end the class.

Got to air this place out, Jodie thought as she unlocked the door. She'd worked late that night to make up for the morning's karate practice. The air in the apartment tasted flat, as if all the life had gone out of it.

Mary Smith sat in a pool of light from the reading lamp. "Ah, my friend, you are so late tonight. You work too hard. I shall treat you to a concert--Holly Near, at the Pavilion --that would please you?"

Jodie shook her head with genuine regret. "I'd love to, but I'm so grubby, and it's too late for dinner--"

"Not a problem. You dress, and I'll make you something you can eat on the way. Please let me do this for you, it's the least I can offer in return for the refuge you've given me."

They sat in the best orchestra seats, waiting for the concert hall lights to dim. Jodie said uncomfortably, "You're spending rather a lot of money--"

"I would rather not speak of it. Do you intend to tell me--"

"No, I'm just used to paying my own way, usually the cheapest."

*I wonder if she uses her money for dope, too. That would explain why she bounced back so quickly after that first night--maybe the new designer crack..."*I don't understand why you don't have a place to stay," Jodie continued. "Surely you can afford a hotel."

"Do you understand that I would rather not be identifiable by the authorities?"

"You are an illegal alien, then?" *And not a dealer?*

"Something like that."

"You should be getting legal help through the Sanctuary movement or the ACLU--"

Mary sighed and laid one hand on Jodie's. She lowered her voice to a disturbing intimacy. "Through the years I have found a certain loyalty which only one woman can give to another."

"Are you making a pass at me?" asked Jodie, suddenly skittish. She wasn't turned on by other women, but there was something about Mary...

Mary smiled and withdrew her hand. "I speak of sisterhood, not sexual bonding. Why else would you risk yourself to save a strange woman? Why else do you run a women's bookstore for a pittance, when your skills could bring you much more from a corporation?"

"I didn't run down that alley because of some politically correct concept of sisterhood. I *had* to help you. I can't tell you how many times I've wished I had the chance to jump a rapist. Not enough to take stupid chances, hoping something would happen, but ever since I was sixteen and Sherry--she was my best friend--she was gang-raped--"

"My dear, you don't have to tell me this."

Jodie said through her sudden tears, "I want you to know, to understand why saving you was so important. Sherry fought back--and they beat her with chains--and she died. Those incredible bastards--I saw what they did to her--" Jodie dug her fingers into the upholstered arm of her seat.

"Thinking about it--" she continued--"I don't believe I'll ever be free

of it. I had nightmares for years. Nightmares that it was *me* being raped and murdered. Me instead of Sherry. That's how I got into karate, to stay sane. I would have given anything to save her, but there wasn't a damned thing I could do. But this time—with you—"

"Hush. More than you can know, I understand the passion of your anger. It is a mirror to my own. Once, I was as you, struggling with the brutality of what men had done to the women I loved. My hatred was all that kept me alive. Just as the theater lights grow dim, day's judgments fade into shadow and the truth emerges, pure as the virgin moon."

Jodie stared at her companion. Whatever else she might be, Mary Smith had an extraordinary and disturbing presence.

Put the whole thing behind you now, Jodie told herself as she prepared to enjoy the concert. *Mary's safe, score one for Sherry, and that's the end of it.*

For the next month, she believed it was over. Then came another dream--a darkened corridor, blood on her hands, a ravening hunger within her. Restlessly she paced the hallway, always stopping before the final door. The same smell tinged the air--the perfume of fear. She drank it in, and it mixed with the smell of the blood and flooded through her, searing her with pleasure.

I'm going crazy, Jodie thought, staring at the newspaper story. How could I kill a second time, and without any conscious memory of it? The first one, I could put down to the heat of the moment, getting carried away. It was an accident. But this time--Mary and I were at the ballet--ABT at the Shrine--we came home and went to bed. I got up this morning--I don't remember anything in between! Could I have walked--and killed--in my sleep?

Even the tough evening karate class brought Jodie only a parody of calm. One moment, she remained convinced of her own guilt; the next, she knew with equal certainty that she had not, could not have done such a thing. After the workout, she wiped the sweat from her face with a towel that she kept by the drinking fountain, and leaned against the wall, delaying the trip home.

"How about a cup of coffee, on me?"

Jodie scowled reflexively and started to snap back that she didn't date men, but Steve Azusa continued quickly, "This isn't a pass, you just look like you could use a friend."

I can't keep on like this, she thought. *Hiding and lying. I have to find out the truth, and it might as well be from someone I already know.*

Over coffee, accompanied by doughnuts, Jodie blurted out her story. Steve listened intently, without interrupting her. When she finished he shook his head.

"It's not my case, but I can tell you this: those men didn't die of a blow to the back of the neck. I don't disbelieve you hit the first one hard enough to knock him out, but what actually killed him was some blood disease. The coroner's had to call in Public Health. They're going nuts trying to figure it out." Steve swallowed the last of his coffee. "But what if those guys *had* died from trauma? You'd have made a confession without your Miranda rights."

"And you'd have to take me in. I guess that's what I was hoping for, if I'd really done it."

"Feeling a little guilty?"

"Steve, I *wanted* to kill that first creep. I was so bone-deep angry, there was nothing I would stop at. I know I'm not rational on the subject of rape, but I didn't know just how far I'd go. I still don't, and that--that frightens me. I can't go back to thinking I'm a civilized person, not after the way I felt."

"I won't jolly you along with speeches about how many normal people feel that way, too. A pat on the head won't make you feel any better. But it's no crime to want it. Only to actually *do* it. The bottom line is that you *didn't* do it, Jo. So get off your own case. If it's any consolation, I feel the same way about rapists."

"How could you, or any man, *possibly* know how I feel about rape?" *And why am I telling him all this? Am I so weak I have to go running to a man for reassurance...or confession?*

"I haven't been raped, if that's what you mean," he said. "But I've laid my life on the line to bring in some crack pusher, or some wiseass pimp that keeps his girls hooked and beats them to a pulp if they squeak back. I've seen the smirk on their faces, knowing they'd be back on the street just as soon as their bondsman can hop to it. I've thought of all the decent people they're going to hurt, and that one day, one of them might get trigger-happy and blow me away. I think how much better this town would be without them. I think, *I'm the one with the gun and there's no one looking...*"

Jodie held her breath, seized by the fire and darkness in his eyes.

"You know what I feel," he said. "Don't tell me it isn't the same. Nobody, not cops or women's libbers or nobody, has a monopoly on righteous anger. But the bottom line is—my hands are clean. And yours are too, lady. The rest is nobody's business."

Jodie could not rebut his argument, but she had yet to find a way of forgiving herself for wanting to kill, for the blood lust which now ran like an unbreakable thread through her dreams. She clung to her relationship with Mary as the one good thing which had come out of the whole incident, refusing to discuss her moving out.

"Mary, I'm going to level with you," Jodie said. "I told you I didn't want to know it if you were dealing, but whatever you're using is killing you. You've got to get help."

Mary Smith lay on the sofa, her eyes flat, trapping all the light that entered them. It was three months since she had come to live with Jo-

die, and her once rosy skin covered her cheekbones like parchment over driftwood.

"It is nothing. I will be better soon."

"Soon! What you mean is when you get your next fix! Mary, that's not *better*, it's only making you worse."

Jodie sat on the sofa and laid a firm hand on her friend's shoulder, feeling the bones as fragile as eggshells. "I see what you're doing to yourself. You look great, hyped up on super-crack or whatever you're doing, we have a good time, and then you crash. Two, three weeks at most, and you're a basket case. Look at you, you can barely sit up by yourself. How much longer do you think your body can handle this?"

"Do you want me to move out?"

"No, I just don't like what you're doing to yourself. I care about you."

"As I for you. We have much in common, two sisters in a world of hostile men."

Jodie backed off, realizing that there was nothing to be gained by further argument. Mary went out while she was in the kitchen fixing dinner, and she felt strangely bereft.

It's none of your business anyway, she thought as she drank her second glass of wine. *At least she's got some way to keep herself going, which is more than you can say for yourself. You're a damned hypocrite, Jodie Marshall, getting so worked up about Mary's doing dope, when you just bumped off two men.* Morosely, she finished the bottle. *I don't care what Steve says, I wouldn't feel this way...and dream this way, unless I'd really done it.*

That night, the dreams came again, dreams of blood and darkness, dreams of terror and hunger. The shadows welcomed her, the hallway now as familiar as her childhood home. Again she halted before the last door, her hands slick with blood. Pleasure coiled around her, and she did not shrink from it. Only as she bent towards the hot red blood, almost touching her lips to it, almost feeling it slip down her throat to ignite the core of her ecstasy, did she awaken, terrified.

The morning papers carried the discovery of another partially unclothed male body, found in one of the less savory back streets of Hollywood, cause of death unknown. No longer big news, it was relegated to the second section, and Jodie saw it only because she felt so leaden, it took two cups of coffee to fully wake up.

Steve agreed to meet her in his office. He'd been up most of the night, working on a child disappearance case, and his eyes were redshot, his face ashen under the stubble of his beard. He said, by way of greeting, "You look even worse than I do."

"Don't joke, Steve. There's been another body found."

He nodded. "I saw the bulletin. Why are you so upset?"

"I can't remember what I did last night."

"So? Neither can half the city, but they don't come charging up here to tell me so."

"Steve, I don't know how, but somehow I'm tied in with those murders."

"Not murders. Deaths."

"All right," Jodie agreed. "Maybe I didn't throttle them. But I could have killed the first guy, and on both the other nights *I can't remember what I did*. Doesn't that suggest something to you?

"What? That you're somehow poisoning them in your sleep? They died of some weird kind of blood disease, Jodie--not arsenic, not strangulation. And certainly not a bop on the head."

"Maybe I--"

"We've already had three nutcases call in, claiming to be vampires. Forget it. You had nothing to do with this."

"I want to believe that--and if I could only remember--or see those men's faces, and know that I'd never seen them before--"

"You mean look at them, down at the morgue?"

Jodie's stomach flipped over. "I hadn't thought--" she began. "But then I would know, wouldn't I? Steve, I swear I'll never ask again--" *And I also swore I'd never depend on a man for anything!*

Steve brushed her words aside. "All right, I'll get you in to view the one from yesterday. Then I'll hold you to your promise. Not another word about this thing."

The room was colder than she'd expected and had a strange chemical smell. A bored-looking technician pulled the refrigerated drawer from its slot in the far wall. *It's a goddamned filing cabinet for bodies*, she thought, suppressing a shiver. Steve unzipped the thick plastic bag.

Jodie took a breath and bent over the drawer. The corpse was a Chicano in his twenties, black hair curling around the base of his skull. The body seemed to be made out of rubber instead of flesh, its expressionless face a flat, uncompromising gray. The hair and eyebrows stood out like stiff, artificial bristles, and through the drawn-back lips, a fringe of yellowed teeth glinted.

I don't know this man at all, Jodie thought, with some astonishment. *And somehow I know if I'd seen him before, even in my dreams...*She looked up at Steve.

"You're no killer, Jodie," he said, and covered the corpse.

I can't be--I'd remember a man I'd killed, she thought as they climbed the stairs. *There would be some shock of recognition, something...I suppose I should feel relieved.*

Steve said, "I knew you hadn't done it, but I think you're using these deaths to cover up something else. You act as if you feel guilty. But of what?"

"Guilty--for how much I wanted to kill that bastard with my own hands? For how close I came to it? Maybe. But something good did come out of it, and now... No wonder I can't let go of this thing, watching what's happening to her."

"Who?"

"Mary, the woman I saved."

"She's still staying with you?"

Jodie shrugged at his implied criticism. "We only run into each other a few nights a week, and she

has nowhere else to go. She's using, I'm not sure what--coke or supercrack, maybe. She's got the cash for it. I've tried to get her into a treatment program, but she won't listen."

"So you saved her from rape, only to lose her to dope? Do you know who she buys from?"

Jodie shook her head. "I could follow her. If I saw the deal, I could identify the pusher."

"Don't you go taking stupid risks! If she won't turn him in herself, if she's not ready to get help, then kick her out, and let her take her own chances. You can't save the world, Jodie. Not even the female half of it, and especially not if she doesn't want your help."

"Don't patronize me!"

They paused at the top of the stairwell, Steve's hand on the knob of the door that led to the ground-floor lobby. He said, "I don't want you getting mixed up with stuff you can't handle. Leave it to the pros."

"You have no right--"

"I'd like to have the right," he said quietly. In the half-lit space, Jodie felt his nearness like a tingling all over her skin.

"I like you very much, Jodie, or I wouldn't have gotten you in to the morgue. I'd like to see more of you--" He reached out to caress her cheek.

"Keep your goddamned hands to yourself! You're no better than the rest of them!" She wrestled the door open and burst into the lobby, trembling with anger and adrenalin.

Late the next evening, Jodie lay in bed, fully clothed, waiting for Mary to go out. Suddenly she heard light footsteps and the click of the door lock. She kicked off the covers, pulled on her sneakers, and slowly opened the front door. The hallway was empty. Cautiously, she went downstairs and through the foyer.

Mary was already half-way down the block, heading north. She walked straight, never swerving. It was easy to follow her through the garishly lit streets.

Gradually Mary slowed, losing the purposefulness of her walk. She seemed by degrees lost and vulnerable. A couple of men stopped, obviously looking for a trick. Mary shook her head, her dark hair rippling about her face like a child's mop. She left the main streets for others less brilliantly lit, less travelled.

This is a hell of a neighborhood to get lost in, Jodie thought, seeing a gun poorly hidden in the jacket of a pusher's lookout on the corner. *You go wandering around here, looking like you don't know what you're doing, you're going to get jumped, or worse.*

With a sudden chill, she remembered the alley where she had first met Mary. *Damn that woman, she's asking for it--If she comes here regularly for dope, she should know how to walk to be left alone. But she's an open invitation...*

Jodie stepped into the shadow of a phone booth and watched as Mary waited at a bus stop. A man strolled up, wearing jeans and a workshirt. Jodie could read menace in his every movement. Mary nodded and hugged her arms to her sides, a perfect victim. The man moved in closer and she shrank from him but did not move away, even when he put his arm around her shoulder.

It was all Jodie could do to force herself to stay hidden. Mary was breaking every rule in the self-defense book. It was only the knowledge that whatever Mary's game, she had played it many times before, that kept Jodie from interfering.

The man leaned closer, edging Mary away from the bus stop. Mary made no sound as he shoved her down a dark, deserted side street. There would be no point in calling out for help here, not in this neighborhood.

Jodie moved to the edge of the boarded-up building, clearly the haunt of more than one illicit operation. She heard scuffling, and approached with caution. Light from a passing car reflected off one crumbling wall.

It was like a flashback to the first time she had seen Mary, pinned underneath the first rapist. The arch of the man's back was the same, and the pale gleam of Mary's thighs underneath her rucked-up skirt. *Why is she doing this to herself?*

Jodie's hands tightened into claws. *This time...this time I won't stop,* she thought, and stepped soundlessly toward the writhing pair.

The man was heaving back and forth, but not, as Jodie had first thought, in the reflexive thrust of rape. Again and again, each time weaker than the last he threw himself backwards...*away* from his victim. With a gasp he collapsed, rolling to one side. Mary rolled with him as if they were glued together, her mouth pressed to the side of his neck.

"Mary...?" Jodie realized that it was not the shadows which made her lips so dark, but the blood which glistened on them.

Mary sat up, shifting into the light. Jodie could not miss the radiance blooming in her skin.

"Is he--?"

"He's still alive," Mary said with an odd lisp.

"What are you?"

Mary pushed the body aside, and got to her feet. She walked towards Jodie with her arms outstretched. Blood spattered on her hands in exactly the same pattern as Jodie's first dream.

"Join with me now," Mary whispered. "Together we can put an end to this creature's miserable existence--together feast, together live. For the sake of justice, for the sake of all women. All the women he's already destroyed, all the women who will be safe from him now. It's what you've longed for all these years..."

She drew Jodie to her in a lover's embrace. Her perfume enhanced the smell of the blood, that dry spicy scent like no other. Jodie reeled with it and felt it flood her veins with fire.

"It's simple, really. Just a sip of my blood, and you are one with me." Mary whispered, her voice like silk. "You can have anything you want, forever, *be* anything you want. An avenging angel, cleansing Mother Earth. Long have I searched for a companion to share this holy work, long--"

"But to kill--" Jodie blurted. "To kill is wrong."

"Wrong? Oh, my dear, these creatures are not worthy of your compassion. No honorable man need fear us, only those who of their own free will chose the bloody path. We merely complete what they have created for themselves."

"I don't believe that. Prison, yes, but--"

Weak, too weak, compared to the ringing power in Mary's soft voice, and the memories which rose up in Jodie's mind.

"Let us not speak lies to one another, lies about beliefs and political correctness. You know what I am and why I have come to you. In the darkness of the night I heard you call to me, just as I called out so many years ago. The fires that burn your soul were my beacon. It was *your* anger that drew me to you, *your* thirst for vengeance. I am what you've dreamed of, a woman's weapon aimed against all mankind. And now, you will be, too."

Jodie shook her head helplessly. Whatever had kept her from that last doorway in her dream kept her back now, and she clung to it for her very soul.

"Do you still deny the truth, my friend, my mirror? But for this single, last step, we are already one."

No wonder the body at the morgue confused me, Jodie thought in anguish. *It was my hatred, not my hands, that killed them.*

A flickering movement behind Mary brought Jodie from torment into panic. "No!" she screamed.

Mary whirled with the sinuous power of a leopard but the man was too close, the jagged wooden splinter which he hurled at her too fast. Mary staggered under its impact, and the man fell to his knees. Jodie caught her in her arms and they both fell heavily.

The blood which spurted from the length of wood which protruded from Mary's chest was thick and black. The man heaved himself to his feet and staggered away.

"I'm going for help," Jodie began.

A pale slender hand waved briefly. "A stake...in the heart...too late..."

"There must be something I can do!"

"Remember..." came a gossamer whisper, and then there was silence, deep and final.

Slowly the form of the woman who had called herself Mary Smith collapsed in on itself, gravity pulling the graceful structure into dust. Her perfume swirled in Jodie's nostrils, a last moment of sweetness before it faded forever.

In Jodie's mind, the last door began to swing slowly shut. She knew that if she could hold on another moment, the dreams would vanish along with the woman in her arms. She had only to keep still, and the guilt and recrimination would be over forever.

No, she realized. Another Mary would come into her life, drawn to what Jodie had made of herself. And then more dreams of blood, more deaths, the choice recurring again and again until she finally decided--to become fully what she was, or to give up her hatred forever.

The last motes of dust clung to Jodie's fingers. She wiped them off on her jeans, and a little unsteadily, got to her feet. For in that final instant, she had touched her lips to the dark unnatural blood, and already she could feel the chill fires of the grave creeping toward her human heart.

❧ *Deborah Wheeler*

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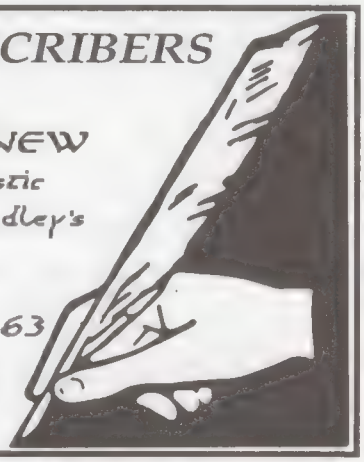

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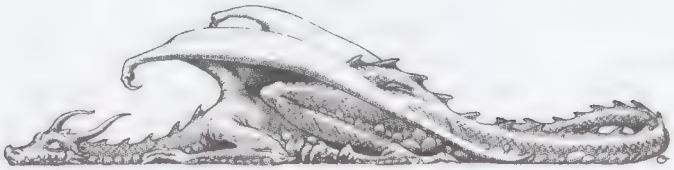


DRAGON PLAGUE

by Mildred Perkins

"Oh no," she moaned, "not another dragon." Mildred Aethelready raised her heavy, stone-tipped hoe and brought it down squarely into the middle of the creature's scaly neck. It dropped dead at her feet, wiping out plants with its tail. Mildred leaned on her hoe, eyes closed. It was only June, and already the year promised to be bleak. A plague of large lizards scoured the countryside, eating gardens, fields of hay, even nibbling on plants drying in the eaves of houses.

"Why are you just standing in the garden? Get to work, woman!" Her husband, Wilfred, stood at the gate, glaring at her. He was on his way to their field, carrying a rag with lunch inside in one hand and a shovel in the other.

"Dragon," she replied without looking up. He winced and nodded, then clumped out the gate and down the lane. She picked up her hoe and went back to work. By mid-afternoon, she had already killed three more dragons, and was working on another when her bread was nearly done. By the time she got back to the house, dinner was ruined.

Wilfred slammed through the door just minutes later. He pulled his chair up to the rough table and settled, scowling at the plate in front of him. Mildred, who was in no better mood, threw a black lump of bread onto the table in front of him and turned to fill his plate with stew.

"What is this?" he shouted.

"Your dinner, or what's left of it after killing those pests."

The fight went out of him suddenly, and he slumped further down in his chair. "Those damned things are going to kill us. When I got to the field, a family of them was just leaving."

Her face paled, and she sat down. One dragon could do plenty of damage, but a family could ruin a hide of hay in a few hours. Both realized the predicament they were in, and several minutes passed before she could speak.

"It has never been this bad before."

"You could try teaching me your family secret again," said Wilfred, trying to cheer her up.

She smiled fondly at him. He had been trying, off and on, for several years to learn. Killing dragons was easy if you knew how to hit them, but he could never quite get the hang of it. Broken hoes were difficult to replace, so he had left the dragons to her. Until this year, they had always had the nicest garden in the entire shire, because of her perfect technique.

Looking at her husband, Mildred was suddenly struck with an idea. She leaned over the table and looked into his eyes.

"What if I could sell my ability?"

"You mean, teach people how to kill these pests?" he asked.

"No, then anyone could do it. I mean, why don't I kill the dragons,

Dragon Plague

and charge people for the service?" She leaned back in her seat, excited by the power of her new vision.

Wilfred, being fairly intelligent for a peasant, caught on pretty quickly, and was soon beaming at his wife. He had always been proud to be married to such a fine woman, who killed dragons without a second thought, and kept a clean house at the same time.

"That's a wonderful idea," he said. "Why don't you start tomorrow, with the Oswald garden, next door."

A frown crossed her face. "Maybe I shouldn't start so close to home, Wilfred. What if no one wants to pay for dragon killing? We could be laughed out of the county."

He pulled at his lower lip, considering; then, nodding, he said, "You're probably right. Why don't you go further down the road?"

Trying to look certain of herself, and not sure she was succeeding, she got up to clean off the table. Sleep wasn't easy that night.

Taking up her hoe the next morning, she walked down the lane until she came to a house she didn't know. Stepping up to the door, she knocked boldly. A haggard woman with a baby on one hip opened the door and peered suspiciously out at her.

"What do you want, girl?"

Mildred's smile nearly faltered in the face of such hostility, but remembering the family of dragons, she pressed on.

"To do you a service this day, if you please."

"Like what?" said the woman, and shifted the baby to her other hip.

"Do you have dragons in your garden?" asked Mildred, already knowing the answer.

"Of course I do. Tell me what you want, I'm too busy to stand here."

"I'll kill them for only a slight fee."

With no warning, the woman leaned back as far as she could, roaring with laughter. At first Mildred was encouraged, until the woman leaned toward her and said, "Everyone knows you can't kill a dragon with just a hoe. Be off with you now and put that tool to better use."

Mildred found herself staring at the door again, which had slammed in her face with a whoosh of air.

That night, over dinner, she explained what had happened, and asked for an opinion.

"She was right," Wilfred answered in a moment. "You'll need to dress the part before anyone will trust you to do the job right. We'll have to buy a sword and a shield for you."

"Those things are too dear for the likes of us, Wilfred."

"Dear they are, but I have high hopes for this endeavor, my love." He took her calloused hand in his and smiled at her. "I'm married to the most talented woman in three counties. I trust you will be successful."

They smiled at each other for quite some time that night, then gathered every item they owned worth selling, and made it into a pitiably small bundle. By sun-up, next day they were in the market, trading here and there for this and that. Late that evening, they returned to their rough wattle and daub home with a rusty old sword of probable Roman origin, and a warped hide shield. Wilfred laid them on the floor in the middle of the now bare room, and they sat through most of the night, working to make the weapons more presentable.

Early in the morning, Mildred dragged herself off her pallet, kissed Wilfred goodbye, and carried her new tools to work. She decided to go in the opposite direction from the day before, and again stopped at the first strange house she saw. There was already a young woman digging in the garden. She looked up from her work, startled to see a sword hanging from Mildred's hand.

"What do you want here?" she asked.

Seeing her fright, Mildred worked up as warm a smile as she could manage before answering, "To do you a favor, young miss."

"Dressed as you are, I fear you have naught that's good for me," was the reply.

"You are overrun with dragons, I see," said Mildred, pointing at an ugly red lizard that was pushing aside the girl's hoe to get at a particulary tasty greenery.

"Aye, that we are. What means it to you?"

"Only that I'll kill that creature for you, for a very small fee." said Mildred and held her breath.

The girl looked her up and down several times. "Kill it if you can," she said, and stepped out of the way.

Without another word, Mildred brought her sword down on the neck of the beast and it dropped to the ground between them.

"Why," the girl snorted, "that doesn't look difficult at all. I think anyone could do that."

"Nevertheless, you owe me a fee."

He had always been proud to be married to such a fine woman, who killed dragons without a second thought and kept a clean house at the same time.

"Yes, yes, follow me." With a disgusted look on her face, she led Mildred into the house.

When Wilfred came home that night, he found a pot with a stewed chicken waiting on the floor. There was, of course, no table or chairs, nor even pottery to eat from, but the sight of a good dinner was enough to bring a smile to his face. It faded when she told him what the girl had said.

"Hmmm. We should have thought of that too, I suppose," he said. "You'll have to try to make it look a lot harder, or we'll soon be out of business."

They practiced late into the night.

Her fame grew slowly at first, but the more dragons she killed, the more she was in demand. With each job, she became more proficient in the theatrical aspect. She discovered that the more she danced around the dragon (careful of where she put her feet, of course), swinging her sword about her head, and bouncing it off the impenetrable hide on its back, driving her shield into the faces of the herbivores, getting sweaty and breathless, or even, occasionally, nicked by her own antics, the better her pay. People were impressed by the heroic efforts she went through to rid their land of the dragons.

Finally, one fine day, the lord of a nearby manor sent a message to Wilfred, who was now fully employed as Mildred's business manager asking for an audience to view a killing. Wilfred accompanied the lord in his carriage to the next job, where Mildred was ridding a mating couple from the garden of the church in a neighboring village.

They watched in silence as Mildred advanced upon the two scaly fiends. Her greaves gleamed from polishing and her new Norman shield was brighter than all the flowers in the field. The crowd which had gathered gasped aloud as she suddenly screamed and launched into full attack. Whirling and diving, sword flashing in the sun, she furiously battled the ugly beasts, as they ravaged the corn with their tongues.

Wilfred leaned toward the lord in the midst of the carnage, to whisper, "Notice, my lord, how keenly she protects the safety of the spectators by constantly circling her foes. The wrath of a dragon aroused is fearsome indeed."

At that moment, with a final flourish, she brought up the sword one last time, and finished them both with a single, masterful stroke of her blade. Immediately, the two animals collapsed into the broccoli, to the applause of the appreciative crowd.

From that day on, her fame knew no bounds. She no longer dealt with single farms but hired out to the highest-paying manor lord, and was in great demand throughout the land by farmers and city dwellers alike. The latter, for the most part, had never seen a dragon. They were impressed by the ballads sung of Mildred's glorious battles, and the tapestries and murals crafted of her facing huge, fire-breathing adversaries (all commissioned by Wilfred, of course). The couple were invited to attend banquets and receptions. Their presence became a social coup.

In time, the load became too great, and a school for apprentices was established. Brawny young lads and lasses came from all over the kingdom. Understanding the temptations of the young, Mildred and Wilfred went to great lengths, with much ceremony and taking of vows, to insure that the family secret would stay secret. Before they were too old to enjoy their retirement, the operation of the school was passed on to their sons, Aethel and Oswain.

Late one evening, Oswain visited his mother as she sat in the solar, putting the finishing touches on an embroidery. She looked on his face and knew something troubled him, but bided her time until he was ready to speak.

"Mother, I have a problem," he began.

She nodded, and put another chain stitch into the garment.

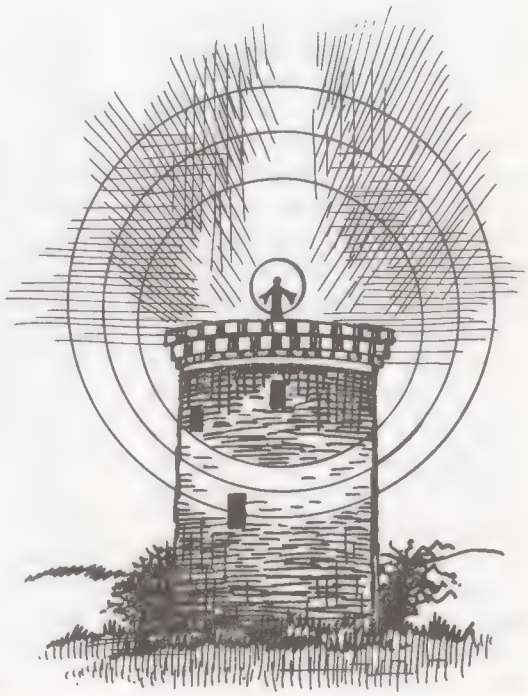
"There's a student in the school causing trouble, and I'm not sure what to do with him. He's very religious, and extremely intolerant of others' beliefs. There have been fights among the students over matters of theology, and morale is getting low."

Mildred looked up at her son. She was proud of her children, and it was so nice that they trusted her. So many children were disrespectful these days. "Graduate him with honors," she said, "then send him off to some obscure place, where no one will ever hear of him again."

She looked back down at her frame. "What is his name, dear?"

"George," said Oswain, then he smiled guiltily. "But some of the students call him 'Saint George' behind his back."

❧ *Mildred Perkins*



Miracle At Roodwell

by Brad Strickland

The city of Roodwell, swollen to many times its normal size, bustled with pilgrims rich and poor, credulous and cynical, noble-born and common; for on this day, the feast day of high spring, a miracle that could occur but once in a human lifetime might come to pass. Blind Mat and his wife Elowyn had done a good business in the begging way since early morning, as the milling pilgrims seemed to feel that a small display of charity might improve their chances of receiving the miracle- to- be.

Mat now worked the crowd in the southern part of the churchyard, not far from the stone-rimmed well that had drawn so many to Roodwell this day. Here the crush was greatest, with mailed shoulder jostling rag-clad arm, and the rose perfume of court ladies joining the sweaty rankness of farmers. The raucous bray of donkeys punctuated the continuous buzz and hum of conversation, and through it all, the small high voice of a middle-aged priest struggled to be heard.

"Six times," the priest cried, waving his bony arm, "six times the water of this well has healed. One helpless and hopeless person healed each time. Always on the anniversary day of the very first healing. That healing was of the blessed Saint himself, and that miraculous blessing allowed the Saint to live to see the cornerstone laid for his church, and the Lord has blessed the water, and in memory of the Saint, has permitted the healing to continue, even to these latter days. Come and try the water, you afflicted. Which one of you might the Lord smile on today?"

"Penny for a blind man," Mat sang out. "Penny for a poor man whose eyes are dark in his head. Take pity, take pity." Coins clanked in his tin cup, a quick rattling hailstorm of charity. "Thank ye, thank ye," Mat said, nodding at the black world, while inwardly weighing the cup and calculating the best time to remove the take and pass it to Elowyn, who trailed him at an inconspicuous distance. It was not good for a beggar to have *too* many pennies in his cup, for a full cup dried the wellsprings of brotherly love.

"Let's see your 'blind' eyes," a gruff masculine voice said.

Mat recognized the officious tone of a town warden. "Aye, sir," he said, and lifted a hand to push up the faded blue scarf shielding his eyes from the world. "Here they be."

He heard a few people nearby gasp. His eyes he knew were bad. The rough voice, softer now, said, "Faith, man, how did it happen?"

"A fire, long ago." Mat said, settling the scarf back into place. "I was just a lad."

"Here." The owner of the gruff voice plinked a coin into the cup, and others followed.

"Bless ye, bless ye." Mat said. He felt his way a little farther along, shook his cup and cried out, "Alone, alone, in a dark, wide world!"

Quick on her cue, Elowyn was there. "Ah, Mat," she said, admiringly, "You've done wonders today."

"Can you help me, love?"

"Aye. Nobody's looking. There's a lame man not far off, about to drink of the water, and he has everyone's eyes. Here, Mat."

Her cool, soft hands touched his callused ones. He felt the burden of the cup eased, felt it lighten as Elowyn slipped most of the coins into their purse. "You are lovely," he told her.

"Mat. Not now." But her shy voice was pleased.

"Your hair is fairer than spun gold," Mat crooned to her, softly, confidentially. "Your eyes are the blue of Heaven's very dome. Your skin is white as milk, and you've two roses in your cheeks."

"Go on with you," she said, but

her hand caressed his seamed cheek for just an instant.

"You're my eyes and my treasure," Mat said. "Elowyn, I love you."

"Then go beg enough to buy us a proper bed for one night," she told him; but love warmed her words. "Go on with you now, Mat. I'll be at hand."

Mat turned, and began to nudge his way back into the crowd, toward the priest's high, fluting voice: "Come, come, all you who suffer. Come and taste the holy water of Roodwell. Come and try its virtue--"

"Damn the water!" screamed someone just ahead of Mat."

"Penny for a blind man?"

"Who's that? Who's that? The lame fellow?"

"The water failed him. Look out for him--'ware of the crutch!"

"Pity for the blind man?"

"Hold him back--hold him!"

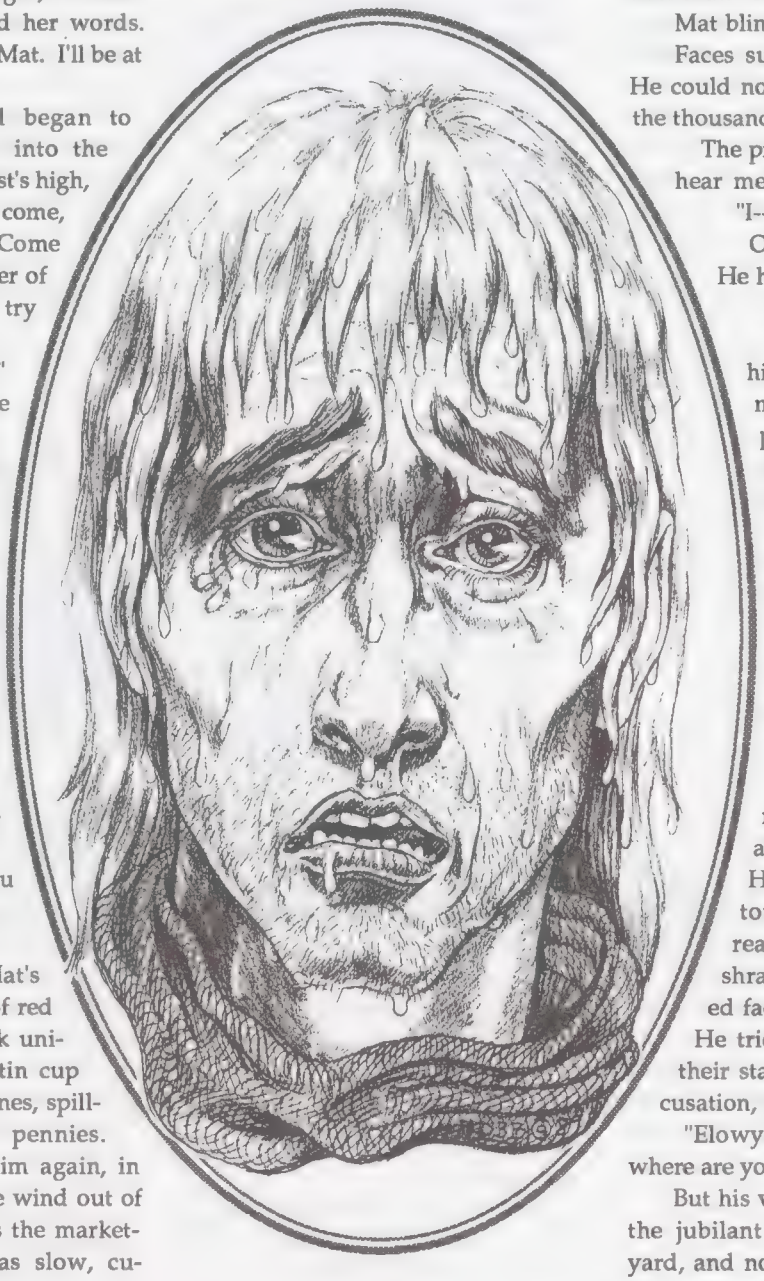
"Out of the way, you blind fool!"

"Penny for the--"

Agony cracked Mat's shins, lighting swirls of red and yellow in his dark universe. He heard his tin cup clatter to the cobblestones, spilling his hard-begged pennies. Then the crutch hit him again, in the chest, knocking the wind out of him. So crowded was the marketplace that his fall was slow, cushioned by hands, thighs, and calves. His scarf slipped loose and was gone.

"Blind, eh?" the tip of the crutch thumped again into his chest. Mat gasped for breath but could not reply. "Here, blind man. Take this. Take the damned healing water of Roodwell."

Cold, cold, flowing over his face, running into his ruined eyes, spilling across his cheeks. He snorted, choked on a spume of water and coughed.



"Get him away, get him away. Don't let him--"

"Here, old man, bring your crutch here--"

"Let me through! Let me through!"

"Here, what is all this, what is--"

"Father, a crippled man knocked this fellow down--"

"He's gone, now--'

"This man's blind--"

The priest, a young man, not the one who had been preaching at the rim of the stone well, leaned over Mat. "Are you hurt, old man?"

Mat blinked. "I--"

Faces surrounded him. *Faces.* He could not put a name to any of the thousand colors around him.

The priest frowned. "Did you hear me?"

"I--"

Oh, the sun was bright. He had forgotten the sun.

"I can *see!*"

The murmur around him rose to a shout. A multitude of hands pulled him upright. The priest yelled something in his ear.

Mat said, again, wonderingly, "I can see!"

He was lifted, held up for all to look upon. "Healed!" someone shouted. "The miracle! This man was healed!"

Wildly, Mat's renewed eyes gazed about at the crowd. Hands reached out to touch him, startling as reared serpents, and he shrank from them. Afflicted faces turned toward him. He tried to look away from their stares of anger, their accusation, and cheated desire.

"Elowyn!" he cried. "Elowyn, where are you?"

But his voice was utterly lost in the jubilant chaos of the churchyard, and nowhere did he hear the answering voice of Elowyn.

* * *

More than two weeks before, they had come out of the hills, Elowyn and he. In the high country,

Miracle at Roodwell

Elowyn had said, spring was still a gold-green promise, wrapped tight in the buds of willow and ash. But in the farmlands, where the road uncoiled itself at last to run between gently rolling fields and pastures, the season had already come. Elowyn had picked flowers and named them to him, her hands full of fragrant spring: violets, lady-smocks, daisies, even early briar-roses. "A good warm day," she told him, as they rested against a grassy bank. Overhead, birds sang, and behind him somewhere, a cow clanked her brass bell.

"Lots of crowds in Roodwell, the travelers say," Mat had murmured. Their purse was already swollen with donations from passers-by and pilgrims. "Should be well-fixed for weeks after the festival."

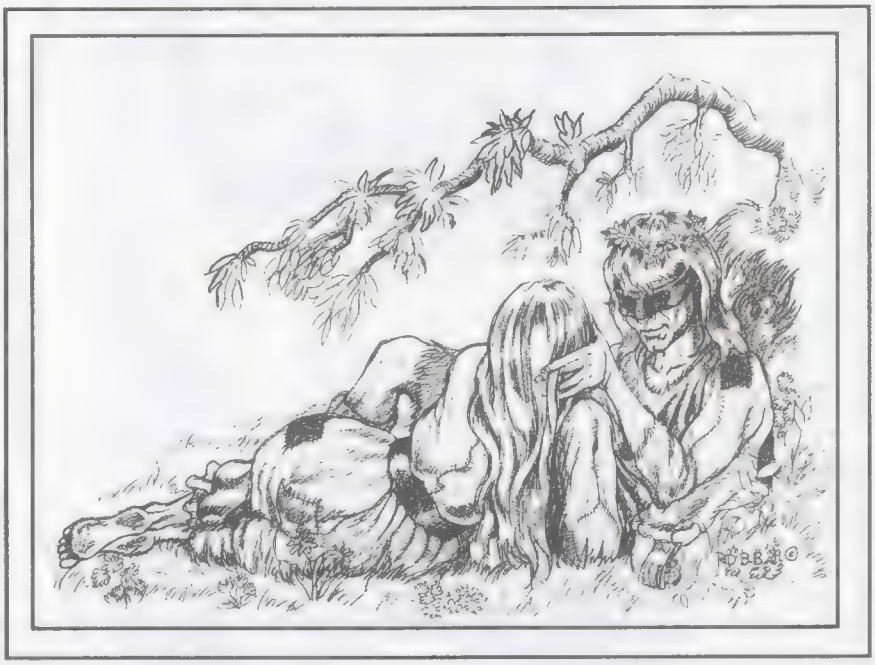
"And don't we deserve it, after the winter we've had?" Elowyn's voice lilted with indignation. "Thrown on the charity of the priests, and separated, as if we were not man and wife!"

"Aye. Me in the parish house, and you in the nunnery. My poor Elowyn.. It hurts me to think of your hardship there."

"'Twas nothing, Mat. Only the being parted from you hurt. The washing of the clothes and the mending--that was nothing. But still I was glad to show that niggardly prioress the back of my heels."

Out of his private darkness, Mat had reached and found her hand. He brought it close enough to kiss. "You should never have come with me, all those years ago. You should have stayed with your father."

Elowyn always laughed at this. "And by now he'd have married me off to a farmer, belike. Or even worse, a coachman. An innkeeper's daughter has poor prospects, Mat. That day when you came to beg and my father turned you away--well, that was the day something in me let go of my father at last." Her hand squeezed his. "And the next priest we came to married us, and if you say you regret it, Mat Macrone, then you just go on your way alone. A girl like me can have her choice of the next bonny fellow to come down the highroad."



"But you love me." After seven years, there was still wonder in the statement.

"You spindle-shanked rascal," she said; but the warmth in her voice belied the words.

Mat had smiled, and leaned back on his elbows, in the warm, soft grass. "Tell me again what you look like."

"Faith, are you not a-weary of that fairy tale?"

"Tell me, Elowyn."

With a sigh, she began. "My hair is long and soft--that you can feel for yourself--"

"And the color of it is gold."

"If you're going to take the tale from my mouth, then tell it yourself."

"No, no, Elowyn. I won't stop you again."

"It *is* gold, like--oh, like the morning sun on the water, with sparkles in it, gold like a bright fire, gleaming on the face of the night. Gold, like money new-minted, and it falls below my shoulders when I let it down."

"And your face," Mat prompted.

"They tell me I am very comely. My forehead is smooth and white, and in my cheeks are two lovely pink roses. My eyes--all the visitors at my father's inn told me I had bonny eyes--my eyes are blue, the deepest sky blue you can imagine, the blue of the halo 'round the moon. The blue of the edge of evening, rising to overtake the day. My nose is small, as a woman's should be, and delicate. My mouth is a wide mouth, but a good one, with full lips as red as cherries in the summer." On and on she had spoken, not with vanity in her voice, as one might expect, but frankly and openly, pleased to serve as Mat's eyes, as much as when she steadied him on a footlog, or warned him of a tree-root in the path.

"Am I not the luckiest fellow beneath the sun?" Mat had said, when

she finished.

"And are you not the laziest, too?" she had asked, laughing. "Up, now, and on the road, or we'll never make Roodwell today."

* * *

Geoffrey was the innkeeper's name, and a broad-faced, hulking man he was, his red face and huge belly proclaiming him fond of his own food and drink. The inn was a two-storied, dark-grey wooden building called, too grandiosely, the Saracen's Arms. Geoffrey, like his building was grey, scabrous, and by no means overly clean.

"High summer is coming," he grunted, grudgingly. "Suppose I could use some extra hands, to serve the customers and tidy up the place. But times are hard."

"Yes," said Elowyn, not believing him. The inn was full to bursting with pilgrims, excitedly chattering about the miracle of the day: a blind man, miraculously healed, then hailed into the inner recesses of the chapter house. The church services this year would have an added attraction indeed, a man touched by divinity itself. In celebration of that, the pilgrims were already getting drunk.

Geoffrey rubbed a hand over stubbled jowls. "Give you a bed, and meals," he said. "And you keep what the customers give you. Can't ask for fairer."

Elowyn stood in the steamy kitchen of the inn, and Geoffrey sat at the pegged table. Around them bustled a cook and her two helpers, preparing the evening meal. Over Geoffrey's shoulder, the cook scowled and shook her head. "Thank you," Elowyn said. "But perhaps one of the other inns--"

The frown did not improve Geoffrey's looks. "Wait a bit, wait a bit. Not too hasty. Maybe I can pay a bit. Just a bit, mind you. Barmaids're plentiful, and you're, well, nothing special."

"No."

Geoffrey shifted his considerable bulk, and his breath rattled deep in his throat. "Maybe one shilling a month, if you're competent."

"Maybe two?"

The cook turned and shook her head slightly. Geoffrey sighed. "I can't ruin myself for a vagabond," he said. "A shilling and sixpence." Behind him, the cook turned back to her stew.

"Done," Elowyn said. "Should I begin right now?"

Geoffrey rose ponderously to his feet. "No time like the present, I guess. Aprons are in the pantry behind you. Start at the bar."

Lord, how easily and unwelcomely it came back to her: serving the ale and the stronger drink, bantering with every vile-tongued, leering rascal with the price of a cup, and pretending to like it; avoiding (when she was lucky) the quick, insidious grope of dirty hands, reaching to squeeze her breast through her clothing, or, worse, sweeping up beneath her skirts to graze her naked leg. Before the night had dwindled to the inevitable six or seven maudlin or stupefied drunks, the old ache in her back returned, growing up from her heels, up the backs of her legs, like an evil vine, to bear its tiresome fruit just above her hips.

So tired was she at the end of the day that she unwisely allowed Geoffrey to show her to the little cubicle where her pallet and blanket were spread on the floor. So despairing was she that she was not really surprised when Geoffrey pulled her against him. When she pushed him away, he put his hands on her again. They struggled, and that was when Geoffrey found the money pouch. "That's mine!" she cried, as he ripped it away.

He hefted it in the dark. She heard the clinking of coins. "Thieves about," he said. "I'll just keep it safe for you. Now--"

"No," she told him. "Take the purse, but--"

His hands were at her. She scratched and pushed. Finally, wheezing, he growled, "I'll have the money anyway vixen. Fool, you'll make nothing extra like that. Customers're willing to pay summat extra for a bit of fun, even with a plain-looking slut. But you----pfah! I'd sooner lie with old Teresa." He pushed himself away and out the door, but the stench of his sweat lingered, with the prickling memory of his stubbled jowls agains her throat and cheek.

She drew the ratty blanket up to her neck and clutched it there. "Oh, Mat," she moaned. In the dark, tears stung her eyes, overflowed, and ran first warm, then cold, down her temples, and into her gray-streaked, mousy hair.

* * *

Brother Xavier—that was the young monk's name--brought Mat his supper of broth, bread, and peas. He said before he was asked, "Not yet, Mat. We haven't found her yet."

"It's been seventeen days!" Mat protested.

"I know, I know. Here, please, eat."

Mat gnawed the dark bread and supped at the broth. "My wife," he said. "Something's happened to her."

"We are still seeking her," Brother Xavier said.

Mat looked around. The business of looking, of seeing, was still new to him, it seemed that the little cell broke new on his sight each morning, born wondrously out the black night. It was plain enough, three high narrow windows let in bars of sunlight. A simple chest, a bedstead which held a straw mattress, two straight chairs, and high on the wall facing the bed, a wooden crucifix. Mat found delight in it all still. He marveled at the texture of the stones that made up the wall, the cunning fit of one among its fel-

lows, at the different ways the dark wood of the cross looked, with the hazy glow of morning on it, or the deep shadow of noon, or the warm gleam of the setting sun. His eyes were as hungry as his stomach.

"Father Berien has spoken to the Duke of Welford about you," said Brother Xavier. "Would you like to meet the young Duke?"

"I'd like to find my wife." Mat said. He finished the broth, and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. His beard bristled. Elowyn always kept him clean-shaven. When Brother Xavier had confessed him, and shriven him, on the day of the miracle, the cup of ritual wine had been borne on a salver of polished silver: in it, Mat had seen his face for the first time in forty years: seamed, red, and rough, the eyes dark under hanging brows, the cheeks lined with care and travel. Since that first shocking glance, Mat had shaved himself only infrequently, not caring to see that countenance again in any mirror.

Brother Xavier now bowed his head, as if in silent prayer. His tonsure was startlingly white in the dark nest of his hair. "We are trying to find her," he said, finally. "But no one recalls a woman such as you describe. And she has not come to the church, though everyone knows you are here."

Mat reached for a flagon he kept on the chest. The brothers made their own wine, very good though a bit thin for Mat's taste. "It's me," Mat said. "I'm so damned ugly."

"Brother Mat, that's not so. You're a man, like other men."

"But next to her, I tell you, next to her, I'm like--like a jackass next to a prize mare. Like a crow next to a dove. How could she love me, she that could see me?"

"And yet she married you, you say, seven years ago. And she's been beside you ever since." Brother Xavier sighed. "I know little of women, or of their hearts, Brother Mat, but this I do know: a woman who has given you seven years of her life will not desert you. She will turn up, never fear. But of this visit to the young Duke of Welford—"

* * *

Folk thronged all summer to the place where miracles happened. The inn seemed always full of hungry, thirsty men. Elowyn grew to live with the dull ache in her bones, she did well enough as a barmaid--though she did without the "summat extra", she fended off the leering proposals of the inn patrons, with forced smiles and false wit. Soon, as she became more used to the place and to her new master, she put a decisive end to Geoffrey's visits to her room. He roared and grumbled, but went off instead to the cubicle of a more willing servant and after a day or two, seemed to have forgotten all about Elowyn.

One day dragged into the next, and through them all, Elowyn saw no more of the world than she could see through the dim windows and open front door of the Saracen's Arms: and most of what she saw was an endless procession of pilgrims, seeking entertainment, enlightenment, or a blessing from the healed blind man of Roodwell.

Geoffrey welcomed all, not believing in miracles himself, as he said, but well content to take more money in, more always more; Elowyn knew, as indeed she had known from the beginning, that she probably would never see Mat's purse again. Geoffrey kept it, she supposed, with the rest of his hoard, behind a loose stone in the fireplace of his own bedroom. It mattered little, for she felt no need of the money. She felt only the familiar ache of despair.

On the other hand, she was hidden away, safe in the bustle of the crowds. So she worked for well over a month, until one evening when she served wine to a loud table dominated by a young man come to town for the first time.

"I don't believe that beggar ever *was* blind," he declared, as Elowyn set a cup before him. "How could a beggar afford such a healing?"

Elowyn's hand froze.

A steady customers slapped the table and said, "I saw it, I tell you. He *had* no eyes. Heard that melted silver splashed in his face, when he was a younger, apprentice to a silversmith. Aye, just pits, that's all, burnt out and the color of raw liver. And the water is free to all, I tell you--that's the way of the monks, you know."

"Pour, wench," the young man ordered. She did so, stiff with listening. "Priests aren't like that. Toll for this, tax for that--probably he was a mummer, a fraud, meant just to draw people and donations in to the church. Miracle!" He raised the cup again and drained it at a gulp. "Don't talk to me about such nonsense as miracles!"

Another young fellow, holding his cup to be filled, said "You can ask the man yourself you know. He's working up at the stables now."

The man who had seen Mat's burned eyes said, "I never heard that."

"Truth! The monks offered him bed and bread for as long as he wanted, but he said he had to get out of the cloister. So Brother Xavier--don't know if you know him, he's all right, for a monk better than most of them--anyway, last week Brother Xavier got him a job, working for old Hubert at the stables, pitching hay and wiping down horses. We can see him if you want--"

"Wench! Over here!"

The voice pulled Elowyn away. She served wine to two other tables, then went back to the first. The group had gone, leaving behind three copper pennies. She took them with numb fingers, her eyes

faraway.

Next morning, when old Teresa, the cook, went to haggle for the purchase and delivery meat, Elowyn went with her.

Roodwell was a confusion of stone and wooden buildings, some grand, some plain, some wretched, and now it was a sea of faces. Elowyn broke away from the old woman and made her way around the fringes of crowds, skirting street acrobats and jugglers, walking through clouds of spice-fragrant but alien cooking-smells, at last seeing in the distance the stables.

Many stables stood there, managed by different men, but she discovered the one she wanted soon enough: it was owned by the man named Hubert, and oddly, it reminded her of the inn, a splintering grey structure that promised the barest of comforts to its animal guests. Hubert himself, an old man with the broad shoulders of a former blacksmith, stood there, and Mat cowered, beside him.

"Blind!" Hubert roared, his chest working like a bellows. "Stone blind, and Roodwell's water healed him! Come talk to the blind man, only a penny!"

Elowyn dared not get close. She watched from a distance, as several men and women stepped up, paid their pennies---all the coppers went into Hubert's pocket, she noted, none into Mat's---and they spoke for a moment with Mat. She saw her husband nod, his head bowed, his gaze in the dust, she caught just the sound, not the words, of his mumbled replies to their inquiries. She heard derisive laughter; saw once, the haunted look in his new, clear eyes, and felt her heart twist within her.

A stableboy led some horses into the stalls behind Hubert and Mat. When he came out again, Elowyn beckoned him and pressed a penny into his hand. "Where does the blind man sleep?"

The boy seemed dull, but the penny brightened his wits. "Up in t'loft," he said. "Among t'hay. Old Hubert's too cheap to spare a room for him in t'house."

Elowyn pushed away and plodded back to the inn.

* * *

Mat lay in the scratchy straw, above the dung-reek of the stable. *I can stand no more,* he told himself. Long had it been since he had called any man "master," and Hubert insisted on that title for himself. But worse, blind as he had been, Mat had never felt himself more a beggar than now. The center of a circle of eyes, he was the butt of a thousand jokes, a show given to a doubting and jeering audience--and alone all the while, so alone.

Soon it would be night, and with night came a chance of escape. If only this time his nerve did not fail him. If only he could get away.

As evening came to Roodwell, Hubert, as usual, had gone to seek wine and revelry. From the inns in the next street came distant sounds of music, brawling, and laughter. Through the open loft window, drifted the dusk-light that preceded nightfall. When at last Mat sat up to pull on his boots, he started and realized that he was not alone. A skinny dull-looking drudge hesitant in the dim light from the open door.

"Run away, Mat Macrone," she said, in the softest of voices. "You were never born to be a show and a servant. Run away!"

Mat's breath caught in his throat. Before he even knew he was about to move, he had burst out of the hay and swung down from the loft, dropping not three steps from the woman. She cried out, in fright or anger, and turned from him—

"Elowyn," he said, catching her by the elbows.

The woman shook her head. "No," she said roughly.

"You can never fool my hands or my ears," he said. "Elowyn, turn and look at me."

"No. Go away." Anguish brimmed in her voice.

"Elowyn. . . . . my love."

A noise from the street--as if someone were raising a cry of "Thief!"--jerked her head around. Her face was haggard and drawn in the half-light. "Go or they'll catch you," she said.

It was as if he had not heard. Mat reached to pull Elowyn to him, and again she twisted away. "Can't ye see I'm ashamed, you fool?" she wailed."

"Ashamed---of me?"Mat asked, his voice appalled.

"No, no. You don't understand."

"Elowyn, I understand you are my wife. If you no longer want to be my wife, I---I no longer want to live."

"Don't. Such words are a sin."

"I don't care. Damn Roodwell! Damn its healing waters. It's brought me nothing but grief. I was happier blind."

"Because then you could not see me."

He could only look in bafflement at the averted figure. "No," he said, at last. "Because it's made me something I never was, and never wanted to be. I've seen my own face. A bad face it is, and I cannot blame you if--"

She whirled on him then, anger hot in her eyes. "You've a kind face, and a decent one, and I'll hear no more of that, Mat Macrone! Look at me! Damn it, look at *me!* What do you see?"

Mat's face broke into a smile, a smile like all the sunrises of spring rolled into one. "Faith," he said, his voice trembling a little, "I see hair like soft gold, and a skin as white as milk, and two lovely roses in your cheeks--"

"Don't mock me!" Elowyn buried her face in her hands. "I'm plain! I'm homely! My hair is brown as a mouse, and my skin is dark with wind and the sun. I told you all those lies --"

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The cry of "Thief" had subsided, but all of a sudden they burst through the door: Geoffrey, bushy-haired and wild-eyed in the light of a torch, two stolid wardens, and a young , troubled-looking monk.

"There she is!" roared Geoffrey. "She's the one who took my money!"

Mat stepped in front of Elowyn, shielding her. "Brother Xavier, what is this?" he demanded.

The young monk shook his tonsured head. "Mat, this is an innkeeper who swears that this woman robbed him."

"She did! She stole a purse with silver and copper in it from me." To Elowyn, he hissed, "You'll give it back, whore. And then I'll take you to bed and teach you manners, ugly as you are."

"Mat," she whispered, "it's our money, our purse."

"This is my wife," Mat said, and his voice had never rung as it did now.

"Give Brother Xavier the purse." He closed his eyes tight.

"It is leather, studded with eight smooth brads," Mat said, eyes still shut. "There is a nick on the inside of the flap, just to the right of the bend. You will find an embossed circle, with a line through it--the sign of Carradon, the maker, who gave it to me."

"It is his purse," the monk said.

Mat opened his eyes.

The wardens were looking at Geoffrey, and not in a friendly way.

"I believe a thief has no right to cry 'thief' on another," Elowyn said.

"Indeed not," the monk replied. "Geoffrey, I see a long penance and a hard one for the wrongs you have done."

Whatever protest Geoffrey began to make was stopped in his mouth by Mat's fist, sudden and incontestable. Geoffrey simply collapsed backward, between the stolid wardens. One did stoop, prudently enough, to pick up the burning torch the innkeeper had dropped. Behind them the barn doorway was beginning to fill with spectators. Geoffrey gurgled and moaned, finally forcing himself up on his elbows.

In the torchlight, Mat looked at Elowyn in undisguised wonder. "You are even more beautiful than you said," he murmered.

Forgetting the monk, the wardens, and the onlookers, Elowyn wailed, "But I'm plain! I told you lies, Mat--all lies!"

"No." He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. "If gold is not the color of your hair, it is gold that lies, not you. If milk is not the color of your forehead, why milk is the falsehood. Oh, Elowyn, don't you know I measure all beauty by you? I could always see you, Elowyn. Not with my eyes, but with my heart. No splash of water is going to change that."

A derisive guffaw choked off short in some male throat. For as the others looked from Mat's adoring face to her, astonishment came to them, and awe.

From the ground, Geoffrey growled through bloody teeth, "They're in it together! I tell you the money is mine! Anything this bitch has is mine—"

Elowyn whirled on him, but before the angry words could leap from her tongue, the innkeeper fell back, stammering in confusion: "Mine! *Yours.* I mean, of course, yours, all yours, my--my lady."

And then the wonder of the true miracle fell upon her. *I am beautiful,* she thought; and with the thought, came the reality. She could not say for certain that any thing about her had changed. But as they walked from the stable, the crowd melted away before them, murmuring, falling silent as they caught sight of her, and men looked after her passage with yearning, women with envy, all with fascination.

They left Roodwell behind them that night. In all their ways and wanderings that were to follow, Mat and Elowyn never met another miracle; but then neither wanted to. As Mat always said afterwards, two miracles are enough for anyone but a knave or a fool.

❧ *Brad Strickland*

CONTRIBUTORS

GEORGE BARR-- We are spotlighting an artist who has been with us from the beginning of our magazine. I felt fortunate to have George do our first cover. Elsewhere in this issue the story is told of how this story came to be written. We will break any of our rules to get a good enough story - because that's what we're all about. We want to bring our readers the very best.

MARINA FITCH is "currently living on savings after getting a day job" and "finishing the first draft of my second novel." She has written and edited non-fiction for the Santa Cruz weeklies. Fiction credits are limited: a story for WRITERS OF THE FUTURE and one entitled "SASE"for Pulphouse Reports. "I am learning to play the harp, having been blessed with patient and forgiving housemates. I backpacked through Western Europe twice-- the illusory similarities between landscapes there and here led to this story."

May this be the first of many.

ISABEL F. COLE:

A student at Hunter College High School in New York City, she has been seriously interested in fantasy writing since she began high school, and draws much of her inspiration from an equally long-standing interest in mythology. She loves living in New York City, watching old movies, getting standing room tickets for the Opera, and reading almost anything. Her first ambition is to be a well-known writer; her second, to own a restaurant.

Personally I began to write as soon as I could hold a pen. Becoming well known isn't so easy.

DEBORAH WHEELER says, "being the product of a devoutly intellectual family, rather than marrying a doctor, I elected to become one. This entailed several decades of squashing the perennially ferocious need to *write.* I have a charming husband, with whom I have produced two children, Sara and Rose."

I began studying martial arts in the 1970's and now have a black belt in kung fu san soo.

During my midlife crisis, Marion encouraged me to write, and bought my first story for the first SWORD AND SORCERESS, Since then, my stories have appeared in S&S 1-5, as well as other anthologies."

Her note on the story was from AC's Hercule Poirot "Do not open your heart to evil because—if you do —evil will come. It will enter in and make its home within you..."Deborah Wheeler has been one of my favorite writers all along --She 's learned as a writer and helped teach me to become an editor. **MZB**

BRAD STRICKLAND:

Born in Georgia in 1947, he sold his first story at age 18, to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. Since then he has written science fiction, horror, and fantasy. About 40 of his stories have appeared in major magazines and anthologies, and he has written five novels. (Forthcoming is SILVER EYES, a near-future s-f novel with horrific overtones.) In everyday life, Brad is an assistant professor of English at Gainesville College, and lives with his wife Barbara and their children, Jonathan and Amy.

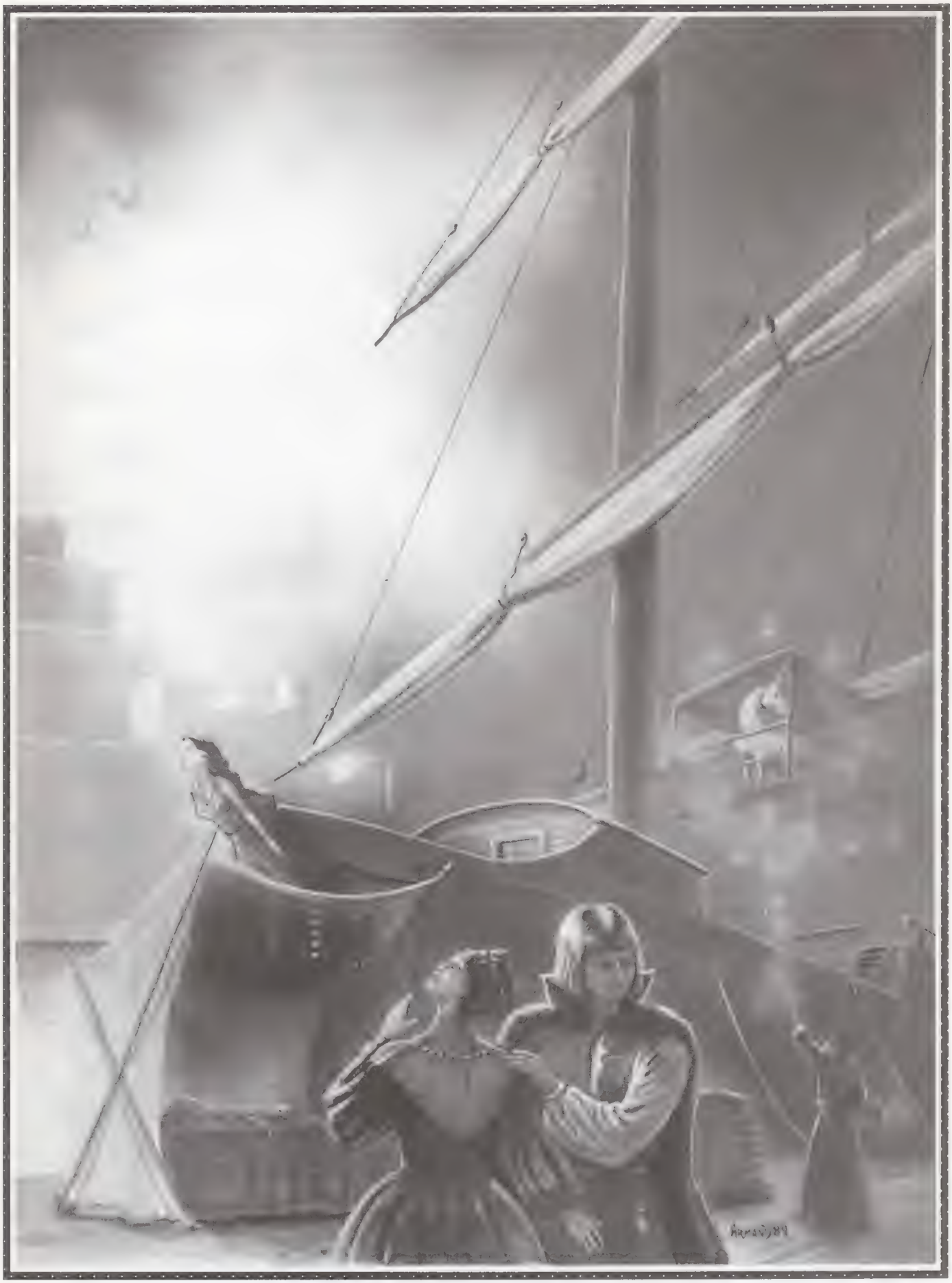
JOHN C. BUNNELL writes "I'm a native Oregonian and have always lived in the Northwest. Since receiving my degree in English from Whitman College, I've worked as apublications assistant and word processor by day to support my freelance writing projects. Besides a strong interest in history(particularly regional Indian lore), I enjoy theater, stage magic, role-playing games, and folk music. I was an avid amateur magician while growing up, and served as a DJ, talk show host, and College Bowl emcee for the Whitman campus radio station. And like 90% of new writers, I also have a novel cooking..."

MILDRED PERKINS comments: "My anglo-saxon first name is misleading - I'm only 30, not the average age for a Mildred. Four years ago I completed my bachelor in history at Indiana University, and for the last five years I've been employed as a computer technician, also for the university. The major problem of my life is too many interests. I'm into photography, cross-stich, movies, sports, Trek, and stamp collecting. P.S. The inspiration for the story came from the intro in Sword&Sorceress V. Reading 'don't send me any more dragon stories' was more than I could resist."

I'll buy dragon stories as anything else – if they are good enough to overcome my prejudice. **MZB** No kidding - wait until you see the next issue!!! JLB

LAURELL K. HAMILTON tells us "'House of Wizards' is my third short story sale...my first book is making the rounds of publishers.

I am twenty-six and happily married. We will have our fifth wedding anniversary this August. My hobbies include reading, scuba diving, jogging, and lifting heavy objects for no apparent purpose. I also grow African Violets, collect dragon figurines and a few select teddy bears...and many birds."



House of Wizards

by Laurell K. Hamilton

Rudelle was a practical woman. The fact that she had married a wizard did not change that, though marrying Trevelyn Herb-mage was the most impractical thing she had ever done.

Her husband was tall, as were most Astranthians. His eyes were the colors of a Red-Breast's eggs. His hair was the yellow of early summer corn silk.

Rudelle knew she herself was not a great beauty. Her hair fell thick and wavy to her waist, but it was only the color of autumn-browned leaves. She wore it in a long braid, piled like a crown atop her head. Her eyes were plain brown, like polished oak. She was not tall, though she did possess ample curves, of which many man were fond. She was a good cook and tidy, laughed often and well, but had a sharp tongue. Her brothers had learned early that she was not to be trifled with.

She had no idea why the tall, blond stranger had asked for her hand. And she found it a sense of wonder, that his eyes shone with love when he looked upon her.

She knew she would be the only non-magic in a house full of wizards. Trevelyn was the eldest and would inherit the family estate. He tended the family magic shop already, freeing his parents so they could further their magical research.

So Rudelle and her husband would live with his parents, two sisters, and a brother. All were spell casters.

Rudelle would cook and clean and help tend the shop. She would raise fat children and fend for herself in a house of magic.

Her brothers had thought her mad to travel across the sea to Astrantha. Calthu was a land where magic was rare and often persecuted. What did she, a Calthuian farmer's daughter, know about Astrantha—land of a thousand magics? Nothing.

But from the moment their boat docked Rudelle had loved the city of Altmirth, capitol city of Astrantha. It was noise: the frantic calls of multi-colored parrots being unloaded from a boat, the high neighing of unicorn-horses with their spiraling horns, the soft mumblings of spells as sorcerers lifted cargo boxes with word and gesture, and the hum of any busy port.

Trevelyn said, "Look up, there."

She followed where he pointed but at first saw nothing against the summer blue sky. Then something, something silver, flashed in the sun. The silver point whirled and raced itself and was joined by a flashing bit of gold. A third point of light, like a ruby winking in the sun, joined the mad flight.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Dragons," he replied, "playing tag."

Rudelle stood and stared until the points of light were a rainbow of scattered stars, a dozen colored fireflies, high in the vault of the sky.

House of Wizards

Trevelyn touched her shoulder gently. She turned, startled, and winced. Her neck was stiff from looking up.

"My family is expecting us."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He hugged her. "Don't be sorry. I love the way you enjoy such ordinary things."

She blushed. "I am a country bumpkin."

"No, never. Most of these people would be lost without their magic. They couldn't cook, or do business, or even marry without magic. They would be just as amazed at the ordinary things in your world."

Rudelle shook her head. "If you say so, husband."

He kissed her forehead. "I say so."

As they walked arm in arm through the bustling crowd, he warned her of his parents. "They liked the idea of having children, but raising us didn't interest them much. Their primary interest is the study of magic, not family."

She frowned.

He squeezed her hand and smiled. "That is one reason I did not wish to marry another wizard. I wanted a wife, and I want to be a real father."

She smiled then, and felt warm and whole in the shadow of his eyes.

The house was on a quiet street with large, fenced yards and tall, stately houses. There was a woman walking very fast from the house. Her shoes clump-clumped on the stone walkway. She nearly ran into them in her haste to get through the gate. She gasped, made a vague curtsy, and said, "I resign my position. You can't cook in a kitchen that explodes," and she was gone, half-running down the quiet street.

Rudelle looked at her husband.

"That was the maid." He said it as if that explained everything.

Rudelle was about to ask for a more detailed explanation when the world swam for a dizzying moment, and they were no longer in the yard.

Rudelle grasped his arm in a panicked grasp. "Trevelyn, what's happened?"

"It's all right, Rudelle. Mother teleported us to her study. No harm done."

Rudelle wasn't sure she agreed. Her stomach was twisting, and she was forced to breathe deeply of the stale unpleasant air. Rudelle hoped she would not embarrass herself by throwing up all over her new mother-in-law.

A tall, blond woman stood in a room. She could have been Trevelyn's younger sister, but Rudelle had been warned that sorcerers lived a very long time and aged accordingly. She was still grateful that Trevelyn was a mere herb-witch and herb-healer, and thus would age normally.

The woman was beautiful, like a princess. But her yellow-gold hair was straggling from a loose braid, and her blue gown, which matched her eyes perfectly, was stained with ink in a large smear from bodice to mid-knee.

The woman smiled; it was Trevelyn's smile. "Welcome, wife of my eldest son." She closed her eyes a moment and yelled, "Gaynor, your son is home! Where is that man?"

Her voice seemed to echo in an unnatural way. Rudelle glanced at Trevelyn.

He said, "The only way to communicate from Mother's study is by magic."

Rudelle turned in a circle, searching for the door. There were only rough hewn stone walls. "There's no door."

"No. In case one of Mother's spells goes awry, the house above us is protected."

Rudelle stood in the middle of the room, trying to keep her face blank. A thin, grey coating of dust touched everything. Spider webs stretched across the room like garlands strung for a party. Broken bits of crockery lay on the floor. Ancient bits of food had dried to their surface.

His mother vanished to find his father. Trevelyn whispered to her, "Mother never allows a maid to touch this room."

"Why not?"

"It is her work room."

"She works here, in this?"

He grinned. "She never allows anyone to clean this room."

"We shall see about that. It's filthy."

His mother reappeared accompanied by a slightly older replica of Trevelyn.

Trevelyn said, "May I introduce my mother, Breandan Spellweaver, and my father, Gaynor the Researcher. And to you, my parents, may I introduce my wife, Rudelle the Quick-fingered."

Breandan asked, "May one ask how you came to have such a name?"

"I am quick with a needle and thread."

"Oh, I suppose, if you have no sorcery that sewing is a useful talent."

His father interrupted, "You are not a sorcerer for you do not shine." He squinted at her. "She does not shine at all, Breandan."

"She is a healer, Gaynor. Healers do not shine until they perform their magic."

He nodded. "Yes, a healer. We've never had one of those in the family."

Trevelyn stopped them. "Rudelle is not a healer."

"Then what is she?" his mother asked.

"A woman, and my wife."

Neither parent understood, then his mother said, over slowly. You mean ...she has...no...magic?"

"Correct."

She flopped down into a dust-covered chair. "You married a non-magic, a non-person? She can't even vote."

"She can vote because she is married to me."

"But if she wasn't your wife, she would be a non-person. A peasant."

"Mother, please remember, she is my wife, and I love her."

His father added, "Son, why, why did you do this?"

Trevelyn took Rudelle's hand and drew her aside. "This could take some time, my beloved. Why don't you go out into the garden for

a time?"

"No, I will stand beside you."

"It will be an argument. An argument with my parents means magic. I would rather have you settled in a few days before being turned into a frog."

Rudelle's eyes widened. "They could really do that?"

"My parents? Without a word or a gesture. Most sorcerers have to at least say a spell, to help their concentration, but not my parents."

Rudelle swallowed. "I'll remember that, and I'll go wait in the garden."

She paused before a blank wall and asked, "How do I get there?"

He kissed her then, hard and full on the lips. "Enjoy the garden. Mother, if you please, teleport her gently into our garden."

His mother looked unhappy but waved her hand, and the world vanished for a moment.

Rudelle appeared in the garden. Two teleports so close together were too much for her stomach. She vomited into the grass. At least, she hadn't thrown up in front of anyone, but she decided then and there that she did not care for teleportation.

The garden was a contrast to the house. Neat, trimmed fruit trees formed a small orchard in the west. An herb garden formed an intricate green-leafed knot around a small fountain. Flower beds were isolated and planted to be viewed from every side: carnations in pink and scarlet; delphiniums in shades of royal blue; fairies' cap with its yellows, pink, and brown speckles over all; the pure white of crystal stars on their dainty nodding stems.

A vegetable patch opened up behind a screen of hedges. Never had Rudelle seen such perfect red tomatoes, crook-necks so large and glossy yellow that they did not seem real. Bees hummed among the bean blossoms. The bean plants were rainbows of bean pods: purple, spotted and streaked, bright yellow, and pale pink. Two short rows and every color Rudelle had ever heard of, and some she had not. No one grew them like this, for the eye's beauty more than the harvest.

Then Rudelle came to the rose garden. She stopped and simply

stared. There was nothing else to be done. The reds were an eye-searing scarlet, pinks from palest dawn's blush to deep coral, yellows the color of goldfinches and buttercups, and whites like crystal shining in the sun. Then she came to one of pale lavender. Another was orange like the rare fruit itself. The scent on the afternoon breeze was almost intoxicating. Then the sound of humming came to her ears. For a moment she thought the roses were singing, then she spied a young girl kneeling among the bushes.

Long yellow hair blew free in the wind. The white and silver of a party gown was bunched underneath her knees. She was working with a small hand trowel in the soil underneath a yellow rose.

Rudelle cleared her throat quietly. The humming stopped abruptly, and the girl turned flinging hair from her eyes. There was a smudge of fresh dirt on one cheek. Her eyes were the startled blue of an autumn sky.

They stared at each other a moment, then Rudelle said, "I am Trevelyn's new wife, Rudelle."

The girl smiled. "I am Ilis, his youngest sister." Ilis stood, bunching the silk of her dress in muddy hands.

Rudelle asked, "Do you always garden in a party dress?"

The girl smiled down at the ruined cloth. "Well, sorcery can fix it instantly, so it's not ruined. It is the last clean dress I have. Mother and Father have both been terribly busy with their research of late."

"Trevelyn tells me you are an earth-witch?"

"Yes."

"And you made this garden?"

"Helped it." Ilis stroked a rose bud, and it opened instantly, bursting with color, and scattering a scent both rich and welcoming.

"That rose, it opened when you touched it."

"Of course, it did. I am an earth-witch, and this is my special bit of ground." Ilis looked at her new sister-in-law critically for a moment. Then she laughed, "You aren't magic, are you?"

"No."

"Oh, Mother must have had a fit."

"Something like that, yes."

"Where are you from?"

"Calthu."

"Oh, no. No magic. You've never even seen it, have you?"

"Not really."

House of Wizards

The girl laughed and grabbed Rudelle's hand in her earth-smeared one. "Come. I'll show you some real magic."

Rudelle had to laugh. A feeling of such warmth, health, wholeness came through the girl's touch.

She let her pull her along the grass paths until they came to the center of the rose garden. There they stopped, still hand in hand.

There was a white-painted arbor with a bench underneath. A rose climbed and fell and curved over the wood until it was alike a small house. The roses were the size of cabbages, white like frost, the lip of each petal kissed with the palest pink, and outlined and ribbed with silver that sparkled metallic in the sun.

The girl walked forward, leaving Rudelle to gawk. Ilis touched the bending flower, larger than her own face. The flower nodded in response, moving all on its own. It rubbed against her cheek, like a cat.

"It moved."

"This," the girl said, "is real earth-magic. Not just every earth-witch can animate a growing thing. It took me three years to get flower color and size, and only the last month has she lived for me."

"She?"

"Yes, Blinny." Ilis held out her hand. "Come. She'll like you."

Rudelle approached slowly, noticing now how the flower heads wavered independent of wind. The ruffling of petals was a soft, sibilant sound. A half-opened rose nodded over her and touched pink-tinged lips to her face.

"Oh," Rudelle said.

A lightning bolt struck near Rudelle. She screamed, and Ilis dragged her to the ground.

Ilis, tried to hide Rudelle underneath her, as the sound of explosions and lightning cracks got closer.

Rudelle struggled to raise her head and asked, "What is happening?"

"Elva and Ailin are having a quarrel."

"What..."

There was a roaring whine overhead; Ilis draged Rudelle to her feet and screamed "Run!"

They ran, Ilis leading toward dubious safety, as fire rained down from the sky. They huddled at the base of a small oak tree. Now Rudelle could see the combatants.

Ilis called, "Ailin, this is Trevelyn's new wife, your sister-in-law. She doesn't mean any harm. Don't hurt her."

A young woman of about seventeen was shooting balls of greenish flame towards a boy of about ten. The green flame splattered harmlessly against nothing that Rudelle could see, as if there was an invisible shield round the child. The boy was flushed and sweating; the girl, calm and unstrained. She waved aside his attacks with a careless hand. Then laughing, she vanished.

Ilis let out a sigh and slumped against the tree trunk.

"Where did the woman go?" Rudelle asked.

"Elva? She teleported. She'll stay gone until Ailin cools down."

"You can't teleport, though?"

"No."

"How do you hide from your brother when he's angry?"

"I stay out of his way as best I can."

The little boy was furious. His pale face was flushed, and his hands balled into fists at his side. Rudelle could see him trembling with rage.

There was no sound in the garden but the boy's labored breathing. Then the climbing rose moved, a mere whisper of silken petals, but it was enough.

Ailin pointed one small fist at the bush and began to chant.

Ilis cried, "No, Ailin, no, please!"

Rudelle was uncertain what was happening, then fire like a furnace blast swallowed the climbing rose. Half the bush melted like hot wax.

Ilis screamed, wordlessly, and hid her face in her hands.

Rudelle was numb-ed at the careless cruelty of it. She wondered, briefly, if she had drawn attention to herself, if the boy would have melted her. Then she stood and strode toward the child.

Ilis called, "Rudelle, don't."

Ailin turned, still angry.

Ilis called, "Ailin, this is Trevelyn's new wife, your sister-in-law. She doesn't mean any harm. Don't hurt her." Ilis got to her feet, uncertain what to do.

Rudelle wasn't certain either, but one thing she knew: no ten-year-old boy was going to bully her. And no one, no one, had the right to destroy such harmless beauty.

Ailin said, "I can blast you, just like I did that stupid rose."

Rudelle kept moving.

"I can change you into a toad. I bet Trevelyn wouldn't like you so much then."

Rudelle ignored the threats and kept coming. She was furious and let the anger show on her face.

Uncertainty showed in his eyes. "I'll do it! I'll change you!"

His hands raised, and the first

word of invocation trickled from his mouth. Rudelle hit him hard, closed fist, against the jaw. He slid to the ground, boneless, as a sack of wheat.

Ilis crept closer, a look of wonderment on her face. "Is he dead?"

"No, just unconscious."

Ilis knelt beside the fallen sorcerer and looked up at Rudelle, her eyes shining. "But didn't you know he could have killed you?"

Rudelle shook her head. "I'm the middle child of seven, all boys except for me. I am not about to start letting little boys bully me, magic powers or not. Once you let them think they have the upper hand, they do. And he doesn't have it with me."

Elva reappeared. Ilis introduced them. Elva said, "He'll kill you when he wakes up. No one insults Ailin like that."

"You speak of him as if he were a grown man; he is not. He is a little boy, and little boys respect and need discipline."

"Ailin is a sorcerer."

"And a little boy."

Elva shrugged. "Have it your way, farmer's daughter."

Trevelyn walked through the new destruction, calling for Rudelle.

He hugged her when he found her. "I was worried when I saw the signs of battle."

Ilis said, "Did you see what Rudelle did?"

"No."

Ilis told him, the deed growing a bit with the telling.

Elva spoke to Trevelyn as if Rudelle were not there. "She won't live out the week."

Elva vanished.

He hugged Rudelle tighter and said "I'll carry Ailin inside and put something on his face to keep the swelling down."

"I'm sorry that I hit him."

"I'm not," Trevelyn said.

She asked, "Ilis, can your rose be saved?"

The girl walked close to the wounded vine, tears glistening in her eyes. "Yes, but she hurts." The girl sat on the ground, and the surviving blossoms shivered and cringed above her head.

Trevelyn motioned for Rudelle to come with him and leave Ilis to her magic.

Rudelle asked, "How are your parents?"

"Down in the caverns under the house. They have research to do and spells to prepare. They've neglected the magic shop. It'll take me weeks to catch up."

"They don't like me very much."

"No, but I love you, and that will be enough for them, eventually."

Rudelle nodded, but was unconvinced.

Dinner preparations went forth in the only truly clean room of the house, the kitchen. The maid had kept up in there. Trevelyn watched from the open doorway. Ilis worked beside Rudelle. The girl wore a clean, brown dress and clean undergarments. Rudelle had even shown her how to mend rips without magic.

Ailin was nursing a wondrous bruise, but the boy was peeling potatoes, something his mother could never have gotten him to do. Of course, his mother wouldn't have been basting a turkey, either.

Ilis watched everything Rudelle did with a kind of wonder. Ailin watched her with a wary and unusual emotion, respect.

Elva came to stand beside Trevelyn. "What have you brought into this house, brother?"

He smiled. "Peace, cooked meals, love, discipline," he shrugged. "Rudelle."

"How did you know?"

"I went to a prophet and paid gold."

Elva laughed. "It looks like you're going to get your money's worth."

He nodded. "Rudelle will see to it."

An explosion shuddered through the house. "What was that?" Rudelle asked.

Ilis answered, "Mother or Father, they are working spells."

"Well, my cake is going to fall if they keep doing that. Go downstairs and tell them to please not rock the house until after dinner."

Ilis looked at her like she'd lost her mind.

Elva saved her. "I'll do it. Should I tell them you said so?"

"Please do, and tell them if they can refrain from blowing up the house, we will have layer cake, turkey with walnut stuffing, candied orange breads, potato cakes, and fresh greens, courtesy of Ilis' magic."

Elva grinned. "You've fixed all their favorites."

Rudelle grinned back. "Did I?"

Ailin said, "Candied orange breads? Really, but it isn't a holy day."

Elva gave a small bow in Rudelle's direction. "I will tell my parents to stop rocking the house. If you can scold them like children, I can be brave enough to bear the message. Though I will have a sorcerous shield ready, when I tell them."

Rudelle said, "Thank you, Elva."

Elva laughed and hugged her brother. "That new wife of yours may live out the week." Then Elva vanished.

"People certainly leave rooms quickly here," Rudelle said.

Ailin asked, "May I have a candied orange bread?"

"Just one, or you'll ruin your dinner."

The boy nodded.

Rudelle handed him the treat and said, "You've done a wonderful job on those potatoes. You've been a big help, and you didn't waste a spell on it."

He grinned, mouth full of orange bread, and mumbled, "I don't need magic to peel any old potatoes."

"Of course, you don't."

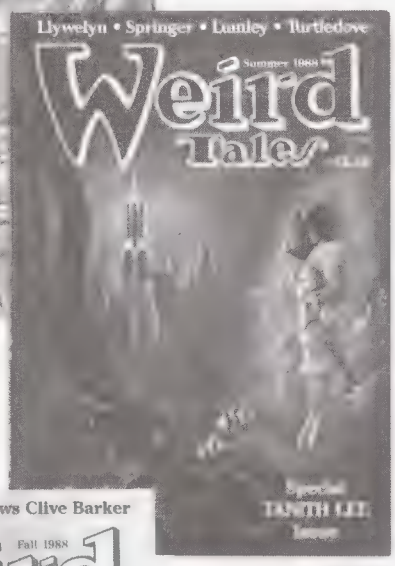
Ilis asked, "Rudelle, the water is boiling. Now what?"

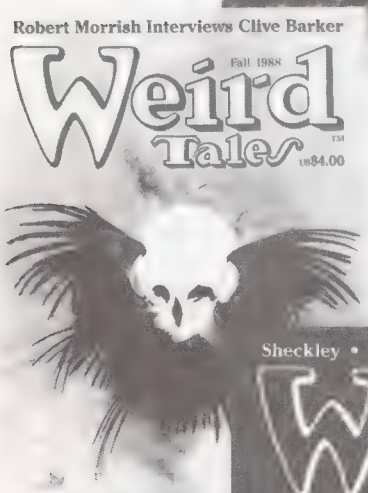
"We cut up the potatoes and put them in it."

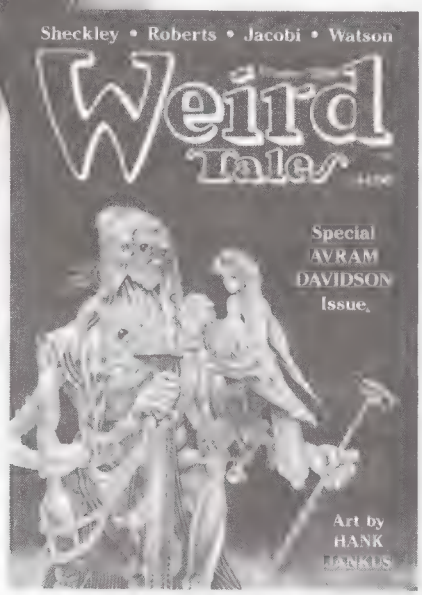
"Oh."

Trevelyn listened to the rise and fall of voices, smelled the rich fragrance of cooking food, and smiled.

❧ *Laurell K. Hamilton*







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The Brass Horsemen

by I. F. Cole

Virgilius the Sorcerer had been taken captive countless times, but nothing could hold him prisoner long. The Emperor knew this, but sent ten thousand soldiers to destroy the sorcerer's city and capture him. At great cost of lives, Virgilius was taken and brought to the Emperor in the Artificial Citadel. He was not thrown in the dungeon, but given a royal suite of rooms, close-guarded with spells, overlooking the Citadel from a high tower of the castle.

Virgilius stood by the window, looking down at the seemingly endless rows of black marble buildings, mathematically arranged and proportioned, their pillars and arches blank, undecorated. The vast city had been raised in a year, from unknown magic and the blood and sweat of slaves, and it had stood for a thousand years, not once taken in a siege. For a thousand years the Emperor had ruled his cruel empire from the Citadel. The people who lived here were his sworn guards, his army, five hundred thousand people. They cared not that the houses were dark and the streets narrow, for they were only another part of the Citadel, like walls or door-frames. It was a strange city, a city of a single mind.

There was a knock on the door and three guards entered, trying to hide their fear, glancing nervously around. The ceiling and the dark tapestries were barely visible in the darkness of the room, a darkness that stopped the light of the window and the single lamp a few feet from their sources, as if a thick smoke hung in the room. It was the same in all the city, but here they thought it was his magic. He smiled bitterly. His city had been destroyed and his wife taken away from him. Away from what he loved, his sorcery had grown too weak to earn their fear, but he dared give no sign of that. He knew the Emperor needed his help. In the Citadel that had risen from the perfect union of magic and mathematics, something had broken the order. It hung in the air, like a break in a line, a tremble in a voice.

As soon as he saw the Citadel, he had decided he would rather die than help it. As the guards now led him down the wide stairs and through the halls, into the throne room, so large that the ceiling was lost in darkness and the throne looked dim and small, he knew that nothing the Emperor could give him would make him consent to help the Citadel.

They walked down the length of the great room to the throne. Iron stanchions the height of a man held thick white candles, and above their rings of light, enormous pillars rose up, disappearing into the darkness. The thousand-year-old Emperor raised his white head and looked at Virgilius. Where the Emperor's right hand should have been, there was only a stump.

"I will give you your wife," he said. Virgilius felt a wave of hope go through him, but it left bitterness in its wake as he realized what the Emperor meant.

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"I will give you your wife back, but you must render me your service in return."

"What—do you wish me to do?" asked Virgilius thickly.

"For a thousand years," said the Emperor, "this Citadel has run smoothly, with the order and precision of a machine. But lately, new kinds of people are appearing: murderers, malcontents, thieves, who do not return home at the curfew. Instead, they roam the streets in bands, stealing and killing and destroying. My guards cannot stop them, for they are many, and they know well the secret ways of the Citadel. They disappear before their pursuers, leaving the streets empty; they seem to sink into the shadows, and a minute later are about again. I am wasting energy keeping them under control. You must devise a means to rid me of them. I will bring your wife to you first, if you wish."

For a long while, Virgilius stood silent before the throne. At last he said "I will find a way."

The Emperor made a signal with his hand, and two guards appeared from the shadows with a white-robed woman, Febilla, Virgilius's wife. She ran to him and they embraced.

They stood by the window together, speaking softly of their old city. Virgilius had built it from his sorcery and filled it with flowers and birds. He had put the heart of the city into a little bird. When the Emperor had killed the bird, the city fell.

Febilla brushed a tear from her husband's cheek. He still looked young, for he had no beard, and his dark hair was not grey. He was pale under his coppery skin. His dark brown eyes were fixed on the streets below.

The sun was already sinking behind a high black tower where the bell hung that rang the hours and the shifts of work and drills for the inhabitants. The tower was too tall and too thin, he thought, and if the Citadel's magic, its heart, were taken away, it would fall. So would the whole city, as his own home had fallen. He wondered where the Citadel kept its heart, but turned his mind to the matter at hand. He felt angry and helpless, forced against his will to fight for the Citadel, his wife used as a pawn in a game against him. But at least she was with him. He felt power stirring again at the touch of her hand, and his mind was humming again, searching for the perfect answer. Suddenly, he smiled.

He asked the Emperor for a forge, deep in the Castle, and there he worked with Febilla, day and night, for a month. At last, Virgilius called the Emperor into the forge, and showed him the work that they had done.

There stood five hundred horses and riders, and five hundred dogs, made all of brass, so cleverly jointed that at a command they moved as if they were alive. The riders carried bows of brass and quivers of sharp brass arrows.

"Pretty devices," said the Emperor scornfully, "but do you expect them to hunt down the criminals? They will move as slowly as children's toys."

Virgilius reddened with anger. "Let one of them race your favorite horse," he said. "We shall see which is faster."

The Emperor's favorite leaped forward gallantly, but the brass horse had overtaken him in a few strides, running smoothly and tirelessly, if stiffly, its hooves clanging on the pavement of the courtyard. Behind it loped the brass dog. The living horse stumbled and stopped, its sides heaving, but the brass one went on around and around the yard, passing like the wind. The brass man swiveled in his seat, fitted an arrow to his bow, and leaned upwards. He let the arrow fly and it struck a pigeon perched on a tower two hundred feet up. Virgilius said a word, too quietly to be heard, and the horse stopped.

"This is a marvel!" said the Emperor. "When will they be put to the real test?"

"Tonight, if you wish," said Virgilius. He spent the day stationing the figures in different places in the city, ready to leap out at the command into their planned routes.

At the curfew bell, all the people in the streets suddenly disappeared into their houses. Standing in front of his window, with Febilla and the Emperor at his side, Virgilius could soon see other figures moving in bands through the torchlit streets. He spoke a word. There was a sound below of five hundred hidden metal doors sliding open, and then the clanging of hooves. The people in the streets tried to flee from the horses, but they were trampled, or shot through with arrows. No one could run fast enough to escape the horses. Some fled into the city's secret ways and tunnels, but the dogs followed and tore them to pieces. All doors were locked to them, and when they tried to climb the walls to hide on the roofs, the dogs jumped after them, and the Riders shot them down.

The Emperor smiled, for the sound of the hooves and the cries of the people being trampled was like music to him. There was no safety for the people, for although there were only five hundred horsemen, their paths were so planned that no part of a street was left unguarded for more than a minute. Wherever one of them went, a Rider would appear, swiveling blindly and raising his bow. Nowhere was there silence; the Citadel echoed with the clanging of brass on stone.

At last, there were no more cries, and the brass horsemen rode once again undistracted on their mathematically perfect paths. The sky began to turn grey with dawn, and Virgilius could see bodies lying in the streets and citizens huddled in doorways. Still the horsemen continued, unheeding, thundering through their complex patterns. The sun rose.

"You may call them back now," said the Emperor. "It is time for the workers to rise and begin work."

Watching the smooth precise flights of his creations, Virgilius

smiled. They were beautiful in motion.

"I have forgotten the word," he said.

As the bell tolled six, the workers began to come out of their houses. They were immediately trampled by the horses and died horribly. The rest waited inside, their fear overcoming their loyalty to the Emperor.

"You can't let them continue!" cried the Emperor. "They have destroyed the criminals—do you want them to destroy the Citadel itself?"

"I have forgotten the word," said Virgilius again, smiling. The Emperor called his guards and imprisoned him in the castle again. For a week Virgilius sat watching the gleaming net he had devised choking the Citadel. He had not been able to find and destroy its heart, but, with the workers unable to labor and the soldiers unable to fight, it would die just as surely. It was paralyzed, for the few who tried to creep from place to place were immediately killed. The horsemen shot even those who looked out of their windows. There was no way to hide from them; even if you were silent, even if they could not see you, they knew where you were. After several days, the horses began to kick in the doors of the houses, so that even the people behind walls were not safe from brass hooves and teeth and arrows. He did not pity the people, for he knew they were scarcely more human than his riders. It was all a game, played in the maze of the Citadel.

After the first day, they had taken Febilla away again, but he was not worried, for he knew that when the city fell, they would both be free.

It was only the Citadel's life, its magic, that was strong enough to keep him prisoner. He stood mesmerized by the lines of the pattern his brass horses were drawing. He knew it as well as he knew Febilla's face; it was as familar as multiplication tables.

After a week of chaos, the Emperor called Virgilius before him again.

"I give you one last chance," he said, "to stop your riders."

"I tell you, I have forgotten the word. Why would I willingly let my riders destroy your beautiful city?" Virgilius smiled at the Emperor's fury.

"I know you hate me, and I know you are withholding the word that would halt them. Obey me before I give you another reason to hate me!"

Virgilius shook his head. "What more reason could you give me?" he said harshly.

The Emperor raised his hand. "See this," he said. "I also know some sorcery." A picture of Febilla floated before them, Febilla bound and led by guards through the underground passages of the city. When they came to a doorway, they unbound her and stood holding her, waiting.

"When I give the command, they will open the door and leave her in the streets to be trampled under the feet of your toys. Your word can halt your monsters before they kill her."

Virgilius stood frozen, searching for anything he could do to save her life without submitting to the Emperor. He could feel Febilla's thoughts, full of terror but also her clear calm.

Febilla, can you hear me? he asked, inwardly.

Yes, came her reply.

Then, listen. You know the pattern of the horses' paths well. From where you are, if you run swiftly, there is one path you can take that will avoid all the horsemen. But you must follow it precisely or your path will cross theirs. Do you understand?

Yes.

He sent her a vision of the plan of the horses' paths, and of the path she would have to take. Her image and presence remained as he turned to the Emperor, hope and dread tugging equally at him, and said, "I will not stop them."

"You will let your wife run a merry race, then."

The vision of Febilla remained before them. For an instant, as the guards pushed her out into the street, Virgilius was weak with fear. He thought of how easily he could stop his army which had now been turned against him, and of how little chance he had left his wife. But he pushed the thoughts out of his head and concentrated on her image, for their hate of the Citadel was stronger than fear.

She came out into the street just as a rider had passed; she shrank back against the wall and ran in the opposite direction, turning into a side alley as another rider rounded the next corner. She came to a wide avenue, crossed it, ran along it, ran down a side street, leaving the avenue empty as another horseman appeared. She tried not to think of her surroundings, the twisting streets, or the clanging hooves she could hear in the distance or along the street she had just left. Instead, she listened calmly to her husband's voice inside her head, telling her to run a little slower, stop here for the count of three, dash across here, do not cross the street until the dog is halfway down the block. She did not allow herself to feel afraid, for she knew if anything changed her course she would be lost.

As he put aside his other thoughts and focused on the pattern moving among the grids of the Citadel, it became easier. The sound of the hooves as they struck the stone streets had echoed at first like the tolling of a great bell inside him, making him tremble and ache.

Now it made the pattern clearer, guiding him as he guided Febilla. He had made the pattern of the horsemen's paths with one flaw. There was one way to slip through the net, and it was as clear now as a crack in the wall.

Febilla stumbled, crossed the street a second too late, and an arrow flew past her from the passing horseman. Virgilius saw the rider's dog turn smoothly and begin to chase her. He thought feverishly; surely nearby there was the entrance to a hidden tunnel. He strove to remain calm, for Febilla was now sharing his thoughts. She climbed over a wall and dropped

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down into the alley on the other side, glancing back at the dog jumping, scraping against the wall with a metallic ringing. The only sign of a tunnel was a round metal cover in the ground, which she lifted. She slid down a short narrow shaft, and in a minute, she heard the dog's brass paws scratching at the heavy cover. She sat panting and trembling.

Virgilius felt her fatigue and he, too, heard the horse's hooves pounding against the wall. Soon it would break through and help the dog drag her from her hiding place. He thought of the many more miles she would have to run. She was now less than a quarter of a mile from the city's gates, but there was only one safe path, and to follow it she would have to turn back, go in the wrong direction several times, trace and retrace her steps, running in circles.

The hooves were beating on the metal above her, denting it, and soon they would be tearing through. She wriggled further down, and there was the opening of another tunnel, which she squeezed through. It was a dark crawl through a maze of pipes, but she followed his directions without missing a turning.

She heard the faint sound of brass ringing on the pipe behind her, and she knew the dog was following, burrowing through the tunnels, as it always chased those who fled underground. The sound was so loud in her ears that she was sure it was always just at her feet. The pipe widened and there was a door before her, leading out into the street. She closed it behind her, and saw a tower rising, thin and black, not two hundred feet away. The door flung open and the dog leaped out at her as she ran forward.

Virgilius cried the word out loud. The dog fell beside her with a ringing crash that echoed in the sudden stillness. The rhythm of the hooves was gone from the streets. Here and there brass horsemen stood like statues, as if they had never moved.

"There!" cried Virgilius angrily. "Now are you satisfied?" But the Emperor had turned pale, as if in mortal fear. He too said a word, and people came pouring out of the houses to overtake Febilla, who had entered the tower easily, for the heavy doors were battered down and the guards slain. She was running up the steps inside.

"Will you break your bargain?" said Virgilius in horror. "You promised my wife safety if I called off my horsemen, and now you send your guards after her."

"The tower is forbidden. You did not say you would send her to the tower." The Emperor's voice was strained and choked.

As Febilla climbed the stairs, higher and higher, the Citadel seemed to tremble, almost to writhe and twist, as if in pain. The tower itself shook, and the stairs behind her collapsed, sending her pursuers falling to their deaths. A cold swift wind blew against her, and she had to clutch at the steps in front of her to keep from falling.

As the thousand-year-old Citadel shook and its Emperor went white with fear, Virgilius realized that she had found what he had sought. The stairs ended, in a little room, quiet and dark, unshaken by the convulsions of the city.

On a table in the middle of the room lay the Emperor's hand. Febilla, seized with hatred, tore the fingers apart and a shock went through the city as if the Earth itself had been torn open. A little black dragon flew free around the room. Febilla was at it, and chased it, trying to kill it. She caught it around the middle, and another shock went through the city. A shriek rose from the streets, as if the life of the city was being choked away. The dragon struggled, but at last lay still. Its mouth opened. On the tongue lay a small scarlet egg.

In his throne room the Emperor huddled, shaking, clutching the stump of his hand and moaning weakly. Virgilius remembered the bird that had flown free through the gardens of his own city, and how it had been captured and brought to the Emperor in a cage. When the Emperor squeezed it to death, the white towers and walls and the gardens had fallen into dust.

Break it, said Virgilius.

When she cracked the egg open, a few drops of blood fell to the floor from the shell, and as they fell through the air, the Citadel seemed to twist, contort, turn inside out, and the black buildings fell in upon themselves in a great cloud of dust.

As the buildings fell away beneath them, Virgilius changed himself and Febilla into pigeons, and they soared above the rising black cloud. For hundreds of miles around, the same cloud billowed up and dissipated, as all the Empire's magic dissolved from the land. They flew northward, leaving an empty green valley behind them.

❧ *I.F. Cole*

RESULTS FROM THE CAULDRON - ISSUE # 3

FIRST PLACE: **THE ADINKRA CLOTH** *by MARY C. ALDRIDGE*
SECOND AND THIRD PLACES Are So Close We Are Holding The Final Vote Over Until Next Issue!

Marion Zimmer Bradley

TALKS TO WRITERS

A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK

This issue, I am going to talk on the final copy editing of manuscripts to put you into print.

William Goldman, in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade,* finally articulated what I feel about reading manuscripts: far from sitting up here at the editorial desk to knock you down, I would really like to think that every manuscript I open in those fascinating long envelopes could go right into print with no editing at all. That would mean you all sent me in only manuscripts which were just right and I could send them to the printer without a single blue-pencil marking. (Most editors feel that way; we'd like to think that every manuscript which landed on our desk was a potential best-seller.)

Every now and then I find myself saying "Read my guidelines; then you'd know I don't want science fiction" or even telling people that I theoretically can use stories up to 10,000 words, *if they're good enough for a cover story,* and I can only buy stories of this length four to six times a year. I still get more long stories than short, but I *buy* mostly short ones, from 500 to 5,000 words.

But suppose you meet all my criteria, and your story is good enough to print. Even so, it probably needs some copy editing. I use the regular style book, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style,* to make the decisions; a few are personal preferences. I do not use English spellings such as *honour* or *colour,* but the American *honor* and *color.* I prefer *grey* to *gray,* and try to keep usage symmetrical; so if a writer spells it *gray,* it gets changed to *grey.* Such 'modern' spellings as *thoroly, thru, donut,* get changed back the the original English usage: *thoroughly, through, doughnut,* though if someone felt strongly about this and let me know in time, I would probably defer. This would not cause trouble with any writers I am aware of except perhaps Forrest J. Ackerman. Also, I never use the terms *sci-fi* or *stf;* I change them to *science fiction* or to *s-f.*

I would like to offer my 40 years of experience and judgement to every author who is interested in it, because I have had the privilege of working with some great editors. For instance, Don Wollheim is one of the sharpest men I know, and the most honest. I would like to pass along what he and others have taught me, plus what I have learned along the way. If you will compare my writing in "The Door Through Space" with the "Mists of Avalon" I think you will see how such instruction has helped. Not to mention that it has made the difference between earning $500 for a book, and selling a book that will practically put your kids through college!

Generally I make changes to conform to rules here at the magazine.

I want you to make your story conform to at least the minimum standards of grammar. Which means if your style is ungrammatical, there should be a reason for it, such as an ignorant character speaking in an illiterate way.

I edit for consistency; a recent story spoke of a character as *uncle* and as *Uncle.* We changed them to be all the same.

We all edit for clarity. Small matters get changed because the writer has not thought out his or her story fully enough or because the reader is confused about what's happening or who's on the

scene. For instance:

"John and Mary went into a room. John said 'I love you.'

"Mary said, 'I love you, too.'

"'And so do I,' said Larry."

Wait a minute; the writer has nowhere said that Larry was in the room. In general a character cannot speak until you put him on the scene or let everyone express surprise that Larry is there. (Hanging from the ceiling? Hiding behind the sofa? Oh, well—) This sounds silly, but you'd be surprised how many writers do this—let a character speak before they put him on the scene.

Basic Rules

Be that as it may (and probably will), we'd really like to skip all this copy editing. What I really would like is for many of you, especially those who are new at this, to do basic copy editing of your own manuscripts before I ever see them, and follow some basic rules:

Neatness counts; make sure we can *read* your work.

Check each of your sentences to make it clear where the characters are, and who's speaking.

Don't use elaborate synonyms for"said". I have a real distaste for elaborations like "he husked" and "she rasped" and so forth. If it is not obvious from the context who is speaking, let them say it.

Use as few adjectives and adverbs as you possibly can. Don't spend three paragraphs describing the scenery.

Check your spelling; use a dictionary or a spell-checker. If you use excerpts in any language other than English, make sure they are spelled correctly, and underline them. Don't use foreign words or phrases unless their meaning is obvious from the context, or a character translates them in the dialogue.

Cut every sentence—better yet, every *word*—which is not *absolutely necessary.* I cannot overemphasize this.

Don't use poetry in the text unless you are a really serious poet; better, don't use poetry at all. If you must quote poetry, it should be very brief and in common domain.

Have as few characters as are necessary to tell your story. Never put anything in because you like it (the editor will never miss all the good stuff you're leaving out). Go back and take out every word which doesn't lead to your end. You'll get a chance to use it someday, **believe me.**

Never use a gerund when a substantive will do because it will diminish the punch. You want to keep the reader's attention. When I stop for a cup of coffee and I want to get back to a story, I know its a story I want to buy.

Technically, you should start a new paragraph with each new speaker. And suit the length of the sentence to the character who is talking; a child, a professor, etc..

Read your dialogue out loud and see if it plays; if it sounds like the character you are trying to portray.

Never put in "fancy " writing - be simple. The late Judy Lynn Del Rey used to edit my drafts by asking "What are you really trying to *say*?" When I told her, she said "So say it. In just those words." I have come to think of an editor as someone who clarifies a writer's intention. (Although there are editors -- with whom I've had too much experience— who do what I'd call *creative* editing - rewriting my stuff instead of writing their own.)

Remember we are a family magazine: keep your language clean. I remain convinced that most bad language is thoughtless invective or lack of imagination; it is simply repetitive and does not serve to illuminate character. If you argue that the kids know the words better than you do, write in good taste.

I have made all these mistakes in my time (except for split infinitives and 'angling' participles). And personally I've never thought that anything I have written was so good it couldn't be improved. Recently, my good friend Deborah Wheeler told me she had submitted her story "Under the Skin" elsewhere and had it rejected as not quite making it. Well, we worked intensively with Deborah on it; I spent an hour, Jan spent about five hours, David one or two, working at everything from use of language, to ensuring the agreement of tenses. There were no, what you may consider substantive changes and the intense work may have only improved the story less than ten percent. But that ten percent is what makes the difference between a marginally printable story, and a good one, or between a merely great story , and a smashing one.

Good luck! *MZB*

ONLY YOUR IMAGINATION

by John C. Bunnell

Solid steel rang against solid steel, and the last of the six metal rings was suddenly linked to the chain in Adrian Ware's hands. But Adrian's eyes were busy elsewhere, locked on a wrinkled face barely visible through the glare of the lights, seven rows away from the stage. At least some of the wrinkles, he noted, were the result of a pleased smile that echoed the roar of the audience's applause.

With a conscious but invisible effort, Adrian broke the eye contact and dropped the rings into an assistant's waiting hands. "Thank you very much," he told the crowd. "It has been a pleasure to be here." He spared another moment's diplomatic glance through the footlights toward the show's sponsors.

"Before tonight's program concludes, however, I have one final spectacle to offer." Music softly underscored Adrian's voice, and assistants scurried from the wings. "In the age of the Arabian Nights, tales were told of the magical djinni, spirits bound to serve certain privileged men. Yet there was one treasure rarer than the magic lamps and rings, a wonder scarcely dreamed of by those long-ago sultans. Tonight, for the first time on any stage—" As he paused, Adrian's eyes flicked to the seventh row."—the secrets of that treasure will be unlocked. Behold the legendary flying carpet of Aladdin!"

The music rose as Adrian strode back to the low table where two assistants unrolled a six-foot length of carpet. At his gesture, they grasped its corners and raised it perpendicular to the stage for a long moment in full view of the audience, and returned it to the table.

A dark-haired girl in gauzy harem attire joined Adrian behind the table, then stepped up onto the carpet and knelt facing the audience. Focusing his full concentration on the illusion, Adrian stepped back a pace and spoke.

"Cast your minds back across the seas and the centuries, now, and watch as Aladdin's Carpet flies again!" He closed his eyes for an instant, savoring the spark of hot light against the darkness of sealed eyelids. Then he opened them again—and the carpet rose slowly into the air.

It stopped some two feet above the table, twice that from the floor of the stage, hovering as the audience swallowed its astonishment. The tension seemed about to break as the floating carpet moved off to Adrian's left, swinging toward the footlights in a long, flat arc. Adrian and his audience followed the flight of the rug and its rider as they glided smoothly almost out to the front row, then floated silently over the footlights from one side of the stage to the other, not far above the heads of the closest spectators.

As it completed its sweep, Adrian's assistants returned from the wings, having exchanged the low table for a long, cushioned couch. Turning again, the carpet followed the two men back toward center stage as they set the couch on the spot where the table had rested, then hovered over it as they stepped away. Finally, having completed its long, elliptical flight, the carpet settled downward and draped itself over the couch. Under Adrian's watchful eye the girl alighted none the worse for her experience.

The music died away, leaving a long, silent pause filled only by the sound of spectators catching their breaths. Then the clapping started, rapidly filling the auditorium. Several front-row observers rose as one, and it took only moments for the rest of the crowd to join in the ovation.

After several attempts, Adrian's gesturing finally quieted the audience. "Once again, thank you," he said, raising a hand to forestall more applause. "This has been an

exceptional experience. But before I leave you, let me remind you that there is no such thing as magic. What you have seen tonight is the product of a great deal of labor, skill, and technical expertise. The final truth is that magic is only your imagination, and that it is imagination which makes these illusions successful." He bowed once alone, beckoned his assistants to join him for a second bow, and bowed once more as they exited. More applause echoed after him as he strode offstage toward his dressing room.

His jacket hung on a wall hook ten minutes later when a knock sounded. "Come in," he said carelessly, loosening his tie and turning from the mirror. The door opened, and Adrian smiled as the spectator from the seventh row entered the room.

"Sit down," said Adrian, scooping up the steel rings from the second of the two chairs. "How long has it been?"

"I'm not sure I want to remember," returned his visitor with a slightly pained chuckle. "But you've definitely improved since that New York run two years ago."

Adrian abruptly turned away from the mirror, distracted from the task of removing his makeup. "I didn't realize you'd seen that show—oh, of course, you must have been back on a buying trip. You always did get new effects three months ahead of everyone else on the west coast."

"Still do. Everything in the shop was current 35 years ago when you first walked in looking for something to scare your mother, and it was just as up-to-date tonight when I locked up and left to come here." The visitor cheerfully rapped on the dressing room wall. "I do hope you didn't bankrupt the student body's special events budget. Unlike some of us, they're not independently wealthy. They did want to open their new theater with a bang, though, and I must admit some of that new equipment looks very impressive."

Adrian smiled. "No need to worry, Frank—I've wanted to get back here for a show since the New York run. Besides, this was a good place to test some of the new material. The silk transfer still needs some work, but the Aladdin's Carpet illusion went off without a hitch."

"Almost," said Frank. "Technically, it's absolutely spectacular. But you lost at least half the impact with that business afterward about there being no such thing as magic."

"Please, Frank—are you still tied up with that ESP research?" Adrian asked. "Magicians have a hard enough time coping with all the fake psychics and astrologers and occultists that breed in the tabloids. At least we're honest about our brand of magic."

"Psychic abilities aren't dishonest," Frank said patiently. "Last couple of years, Meriwether's psychology department has done some experiments that show definite indications of clairvoyant effects. There's a long way to go yet, sure, and it's not anything like the tricks I sell in the shop. But it's still legitimate scientific study, and it's still ESP."

There was a touch of exasperation in Adrian's amused reply. "We've had this argument for years, Frank, and it always ends in a draw. You insist I've got a closed mind, and I keep telling you it's a matter of professional ethics. Stage magic and ESP just don't mix—look how most magicians stay as far away from Kreskin as penguins do from the Sahara."

Frank raised an eyebrow. "But look at what Kreskin *does*, Adrian. Oh, I know a lot of his stunts have been explained away, but that still leaves some very interesting cases. Granted, there's no conclusive proof—"

"And there never will be," Adrian returned, "because ESP only works when the people who believe in it say it does. You know as well as I do that the laboratory studies always come up ambiguous. There's enough 'potential' for believers to say it works, and enough margin for error that the skeptics refuse to accept the results."

"In other words," Frank said dryly, "ESP is as much a product of the imagination as stage magic."

Adrian's comeback was cut off by another knock on the dressing room door. "What is it?" he called.

One of his assistants pushed the door open and nervously took a step forward. "We've got a problemi, it's the wiring on the Aladdin's Carpet motor. One of the connections is blown out—it must have shorted during the show, or maybe at the end of rehearsal this afternoon" he said. "Only that's impossible..."

"I see," said Adrian slowly. "I'll look at it in a few minutes. It must have come loose when we switched off. Is everything else struck?"

"Not yet—I'd better get back to work. See you later." And the assistant shrugged, closing the door behind him as he left.

Frank stared thoughtfully into space, a long soft whistle escaping his lips. "Well," he said matter-of-factly, "so much for professional ethics."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Adrian's tone was sharp. "The wiring on the motor shorted at the end. So?"

"No, Adrian," Frank said quietly. "Think about it. Wires don't overload when you're reducing the current. That motor has to have shorted before or during the effect—yet the levitation worked smooth as marble. If that's not conclusive evidence of *something*, I don't know what is."

"I was watching that carpet every second, and nothing was wrong," Adrian objected. "If anything had happened, I would have seen it."

"Watching every second." Frank echoed Adrian's words. "Hmmm. And if I know you, you don't let anything distract you while you're on stage. There could be an elephant in the orchestra pit and you wouldn't notice it."

"Precisely. Not paying attention to what you're doing is what

gets you in trouble."

Frank grinned. "Like you said—precisely. And if the motor wasn't powering the carpet, you must have been paying very careful attention indeed. Kind of ironic, I'd say—denying that there's any such thing as magic right after doing something like that."

Adrian almost seemed not to hear the comment. Instead, he sat silently for several moments, his back straight against the dark wood of the chair. "No," he said finally, shaking his head. "It isn't possible, it just isn't possible. Magic doesn't exist." The words were only half directed at Frank, who watched his former student with growing concern as Adrian closed his eyes and went on talking softly to himself.

"Adrian!" said Frank abruptly. The magician's eyes snapped open and his vision came back into focus. "You had me worried for a minute there."

"Nothing's wrong, Frank," Adrian told the older man firmly. "Nothing at all. I just had to get things sorted out in my head. You almost had me convinced I was psychic."

"But—" Frank gulped suddenly, taking several quick breaths. "There's no other explanation," he said rapidly, hurrying to get the words out. "It had to be—" He gulped again, the sentence turning into a series of gasps.

"No, it didn't." Adrian's spoke with a note of conviction. "The short must have happened after the levitation. Now let's not argue about it all night." He attempted to sound relaxed as he watched Frank trying to shrug off his shortness of breath. "Are you all right?"

"I—think so, now. I don't know what it could have been."

Adrian looked quizzically at his friend. "You're not as young as you once were, Frank. Heart getting too much exercise, maybe?"

Frank laughed, depth returning to his voice. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm probably healthier than you are. The insurance doctor told me last year I'm the only patient he knows who'll live long enough to pay the company the full value of his coverage."

"Congratulations," said Adrian, smiling. "But be careful. Too much arguing about this ESP nonsense and you might prove him wrong."

Halfway through a hearty laugh, Frank suddenly broke off, his face taking on a look of surprise. "Good Lord, that explains it. Adrian, do you realize what you just said?"

"Arguing about ESP..." Adrian repeated, slowly assimilating Frank's words. "You're not saying *I* would have—that's even more absurd than your theory about the motor. *It is not possible!*" The denial ricocheted off the dressing room walls.

Then a long, thin, hissing blended into the last traces of the echo."Not possible?" gasped Frank. "Then this is ...only ...your ...imagination? Adrian, listen to me before...it...proves...you...right." He slid down in the chair and was silent.

After staring at Frank for an instant, Adrian reached out with instinctive speed to catch the older man's left wrist in one hand. Sixty seconds later, the wrist slipped out of fingers suddenly gone limp, and anyone watching would have been hard put to tell that one of the two men was still alive.

"Not possible." He said it again, softly, but the conviction in his voice had turned to vacant disbelief, and he shook his head slowly, unable to turn away from Frank. "Only my imagination?" Adrian laughed nervously at the irony of the thought, and his eyes flicked around the room much as they had when he'd used the phrase on stage, guided more by force of habit than by any conscious effort.

Something stopped him when his gaze lighted on the half-dozen steel rings he had moved from Frank's chair. Tentatively, Adrian picked up two of the rings, holding one in each hand and studying them thoughtfully. Quietly, he went through the motions of the first phase of the linking sequence, performing the sleight of hand required with easy precision. Continuing, he reversed the process, separating the two metal rings with the same skill. That done, he held them apart, shifting his eyes back and forth between them and weighing each one in a hand that had begun to quiver slightly. Finally, he opened his right hand and let the specially prepared ring slide from his fingers, leaving a solid circle of steel in his left hand as he reached for a pair of equally solid rings that lay already linked on the dressing table. Deliberately, he raised the linked rings toward the single hoop and moved his hands closer together, beginning the motions he had carried out moments before to connect the two individual rings. Solid steel brushed against solid steel—

And Adrian flung the rings suddenly and violently into separate corners of the dressing room. His right arm snaked backward and plucked the black formal jacket from its hook. He rose roughly out of his chair, shrugging the suit coat on, and reached the door in two strides. The aggressive air evaporated as he stood in the open doorway, glancing first back at Frank and then down the corridor toward the stage, where the carpet lay still on the cushioned couch waiting to be rolled up. But the magician turned away from both and walked quickly toward another door, shaking his head and murmuring something to himself.

The fluorescent green "Exit" sign glowed against black asphalt and black sky as Adrian Ware disappeared into the night.

❧ *John C. Bunnell*

We found out that two of our editors read this story differently. One said "Adrian killed with his ESP." Another said not. What do you think? Either way it's read, we liked it. How about you?

MZB

MZB*fm* LETTERS

DWIGHT JON ZIMMERMAN
Brooklyn, NY

Dear Ms. Bradley:

Congratulations on your new magazine! Yesterday I purchased the third issue. It was the first time I saw a copy. So apparently the first two issues sold out virtually immediately since I try to make it to Forbidden Planet in Manhattan once a week. I hope such fortune continues for you!

I've enjoyed your work ever since I was a fan growing up in North Dakota in the 1960's. Now I'm an editor and writer for Marvel Comics. And even though I regularly visit the s-f/comic book shops, there are simply too many demands on my time (I'm also a husband and father) for me to do more than keep a cursory track of all that is going on in the industry. I have followed with admiration your growing success, and the branching out of your work which includes the excellent novel MISTS OF AVALON. So I was truly pleased to see this new magazine of yours. It is an ambitious and demanding project, and from the look and quality of the stories, one I am certain will succeed.

I was doubly pleased to see that among your contributors in this issue was Janet Fox. While in North Dakota I co-published the fanzine OMNIFAN and I had the pleasure of printing one of her stories. So I am happy to see that she did continue writing and is now a professional in the field.

Thank you, once again, for your fine magazine whose short stories remind me again why I loved fantasy and science fiction.

This is why I wanted to do a magazine in the first place-- to encourage the natural step from fan to pro. Maybe I'm just a back number. ***MZB***

MARY C. ALDRIDGE
Cambridge, MA

Dear Editors:

Please give my thanks to Alicia Austin for her beautiful illustrations of my story (in Issue #3), "The Adinkra Cloth". I also admired her illustration for "Dream Journey" (p. 43 of that issue).

I wish to clarify one point: "The Adinkra Cloth" is not, as stated on page 56, based on an African legend. Though it draws on African folklore-- the man who can change into a leopard; the bush as the abode of the dead-- and uses fairytale forms familiar all over the world (orphaned children, wicked uncle, helpful talisman), the story is an original one and not based on any legend I know... though I'm pleased if it has the emotional force of one!

It's always nice to be corrected by somebody who knows what she's talking about. May this be only the first of many stories. ***MZB***

DAVID KETELSEN
Marietta, GA

Dear Ms. Bradley,

To my great pleasure I discovered your magazine the other day. Unfortunately, to my dismay, I find that I've missed the first two issues! I hope that you'll be able to publish more frequently in the near future. Your artwork (especially that of G. Barr) is quite effective and the fiction very enjoyable (particularly Easton, Karr, Millitello, and Aldridge). Congratulations on such a fine literary/fantasy 'zine-- keep them coming!

Back issues can be ordered from us while they last-- step right up! ***MZB***

DEBORAH MILLITELLO
Brighton, IL

Dear Jan Burke,

I did receive my copy of issue #3 last week, and I was just thrilled. The cover was very eye-catching, and the stories were the best I've read since issue #2. I think I just stared at my story for an hour, occasionally touching my name. George Barr must have seen the image I had in my mind. His artwork was perfect for the story, just the way I'd envisioned Elrahad. Everyone I showed the magazine to was awed by the beauty and de-

tail. Please, thank Mr. Barr for me. Is there any way I could get a print of the picture by itself?

Yes, I do live near Hardin, Illinois. It's around 45 minutes west of my home. I have relatives who live about five miles south of the town, and I spent a lot of time there while I was growing up. Some of the best apples and apple cider in the country. Are you from Hardin? Do you know people from that area?

Thank you for liking "The Djinn Bottle" and for making my lifelong dream come true.

Thank you for writing such a good story! We all enjoyed it.

For you, and anyone else who is interested in the original art used in the magazine, please send your request to me and I will see that it is forwarded to the artist. And let me thank you for them for the comments, I know that they often do not get any feedback on their art work, and they certainly appreciate it.

Yes, I have a number of relatives in Hardin. My very dear Grandmother, Anna Sagez Burke, was born there and her brother George, who is probably over 100 years old now, was the Sheriff for a number of years. Let's hear it for Hardin, IL !!! JLB

LAURIE SPARER
(L. A. Taylor)
Minneapolis, MN

Dear Ms. Burke:

The issue containing my story, "Counter Example", arrived several days ago. I haven't had time to read the whole thing yet, but it certainly looks great so far. I loved the illustration for my story, too, though I felt a little sad to think that adorable baby would so soon be dead.

I am now almost completely without complaint. The only one remaining is that the ballot is on the back of the page of contributors' notes, which I don't want to remove from the magazine. I don't know about other readers, but I am always fascinated by these small scraps of information about the people who write the other stories. I wish every magazine would print them.

Those notes were a great idea of Marion's. And yes, I will try to remember to put the Cauldron on the back of the subscription page where it belongs! (Once in awhile at 3 a.m. when I'm putting the final pages together, I lose it....) JLB

CHANTAL
GAUDIANO
Seabrook, Texas

Dear Ms. Bradley,

Thank you for sending the third issue of your magazine! I really enjoyed #3.

Please keep Armand Cabrera as an artist; his work for "Khedderide" was beautiful. I much prefer realism in fantasy art. By the way, I like Fiona Zimmer's art a lot. Will she be contributing any more?

My choices for this season's Cauldron are:

#1. "The Adinkra Cloth" - - I liked it the because it portrayed children as children instead of as minature heroes, and it was a good story. Too bad it couldn't go into Sword & Sorceress.

#2. "Counterexample"- - Okay, I admit it; I'm a hopeless Star Trek fan. This story charmed me...reminds me of "A Womanly Talent" by Anne McCaffrey in To Ride Pegasus.

#3. "A Flower From the Dust of Khedderide" - - Beautiful story, and I think Silivera made the right decision. Much better title, I think, than "To Father a Sohn".

I thought "Falling Apart" was hilarious, but it was too obviously unrealistic for me. Also, the accompaying vision of Mickey Mouse and a roomful of mops was distracting.

As usual, however, it's a great magazine. I look forward to getting #4. Good luck!

Thank you for your comments!

JANET FOX
Osage City, KS

Dear Editors:

I was very happy with your edit of "Dream Journey"; I couldn't tell that anything had been left out, so I can't help feeling that the story was actually improved by the cutting. I also enjoyed Alicia Austin's fine illustrations.

And as long as I'm being effusive I may as well say that I enjoyed many of the other stories, especially those by Pat Cirone (Khedderide) and Mary C. Aldridge (Adinkra Cloth). I liked the magazine as a whole, too, so much so that I subscribed.

Thank you Janet. Stories usually are improved by good editing. I'm always happy to be edited by someone who knows as much or more than I do: on the other hand, when someone new to this business edited me, I screamed! It depends on who does it and why. MZB

M.J. KRAMER
Portland, OR

To the Editor:

I am writing because Richard Lupoff suggested we do so. What the heck, I like to write letters. The magazine is wonderful and I am enjoying it very much. I especially like the cover art on the latest issue. I could not choose a favorite story, though, because they were all enjoyable and I do not like to "pick favorites". I did however take exception to one particular sentence: "I lifted my skirts as I began up the stairway." This sentence is ungrammatical. In this sentence, "Began" must be followed by an infinitive. "Began" is not action. It is the prelude to action. See

LETTERS

ferring to is "to commence", but the meaning is the same as "to begin". The character is engaged in the act of going up the stairway and to "begin" up the stairway is to imply that the character never got past putting her foot on the first step. Without proper usage, the writer often makes - ah - interesting errors (there is a wonder sentence in The Catch Trap where MZB calls Paul & Ina Reddick's trailer "a small yapping puppy on a leash"). Everyone makes grammatical errors, or abuses their poetic license from time to time. Sometimes there is no grammatical way to convey your meaning. I hope I am not nitpicking too much here. I simply believe a good writer should know how the English language works and try to work with it as much as possible, instead of working against its rules.

M. J. ; I am responding to your letter as I am late going to press, and Marion is out of town on a speaking engagement.

Your points on grammar are well taken. I know that Marion feels very strongly about proper grammatical usage. I have often heard her say that she wished she could give some authors the kind of grade school grammar class she had from her fifth-sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Violet B. Glady, East Greenbush, New York. (Marion can still diagram the most complicated sentence). In this issue she has devoted her column, MZB Talks To Writers, *to the subject of editing manuscripts.*

M.J., in the short time that I have been helping Marion with her magazine, I have found that the problem of author errors is far more complex than it may seem...

P.S. I will ask Marion to respond to your comment on the Catch Trap *next issue-- it will be interesting to hear the image she was aiming for -- from what you wrote, it sounds like a trailer with squeaky brakes!! JLB*

What do you readers think ???

What is your opinion of the overall quality *of the stories we are publishing? Do you recommend this magazine to your friends, relatives, neighbors??? Should Marion be investing so much of her time, and energy, (not to mention money) promoting new writers? What do you think? You can jot down your comments in a letter, on a postcard, on the Cauldron, put in a note with your renewal form, or your subscription form! -- ("don't need to be coy Roy, just get on the bus Gus...")*

I would appreciate hearing from you. Please Mail your comments, suggestions, and ideas to us at:

MZB *Fantasy Magazine*
P.O. Box 11095
Piedmont, CA 94611-9991

Thank you, JLB

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NIEKAS
SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

Through the Trees and to the Left

by Marina Fitch

My sister Fitz sat on the steps behind the UC Santa Cruz Main Library, feet together, hands clasped in her lap. She looked a little like a bewildered Dorothy--she'd clicked the ruby slippers and still she wasn't home.

I honked and she ran to the car. She no sooner flopped into the passenger seat, than she buckled the seat belt. "Safe," she said.

"Fitz, you didn't really walk from Cabrillo," I said as I pulled the car around. It takes 30, 40 minutes just to drive from the community college to the university. It would take the better part of a day to walk it. I glanced at her; she was cool, if uncollected, in a denim skirt and t-shirt. "Tell me you didn't walk it."

She rubbed her temples with her left hand and slumped against the door. "Oh, Sarah, you're never going to believe this. I was hiking behind Cabrillo--you know that field? Well, if you go up far enough, there's a trail that leads up a hill. At one point the path is all grassy and these trees create this arch, and I started thinking it looked like that fire trail that leads to the meadow at the university, the one near Empire Grade."

Fitz tapped her pink and blue fingernails on the armrest and stared out the window. I swore at some jerk who cut in front of me, calmed myself and said, "Then?"

"I went through the trees and I was at UCSC."

"Fitz--"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I was. I had to walk all the way to the science buildings before I could call you.

I glanced at her. She hadn't tried a story like this since we were nine and ten. "Fitz, think maybe you can explain this? Coherently?"

She groaned. "I don't know. There was this article in the Chronicle a few days ago, about a genie getting married. Did you see it?"

My sister Fitz, the only one who reads the fillers. "I don't peruse the quarter inches."

"No, Sarah, this was a real article. This genie queen got married in Bahrain--"

"Where?"

Fitz pursed her lips and shook her head. "Bahrain. The genie announced that on her wedding day she would grant every mortal a free wish--something reasonable, no immortality or anything. I thought that was pretty neat, so I read the article to David--"

I groaned. "Are you two back together again?"

"Yes. Sarah, he promised." She took a deep breath and rushed on. "Anyway, he said it was stupid. I told him to be careful and reread the part about scoffers getting the hex in nineteen days. So he told me *I* was stupid, and what would I wish for anyway? Well, I told him I wanted power. He started laughing and wanted to know what kind of power *I* could possibly want." She stared at her fingernails, then chewed the edge of one. "So I said, the power of suggestion."

"The *what?*"

"That's what David said." She squirmed, her voice peevishly inaudible. "I mean, why not? I just thought, if one place suggests another place maybe I wouldn't have to go through all the fuss of booking tickets and packing..."

I glanced at her sideways. She sat there miserably, just waiting for me to tell her how dumb the whole thing was. Her eyes had a bright and, well, *transformed* quality. I rubbed her knee. "And you think that's how you got to UCSC? The trees at Cabrillo 'suggested' the other trees and there you were?"

She looked up, daring to hope. "Yes."

I turned up Highway One, toward San Francisco and away from Cabrillo. "How many days until David's hex?"

"Sixteen days, not counting today."

A grin slipped across my face. Sixteen days...Good old David, the charming, slimy bastard...Maybe he'd get arrested for malpractice, or maybe he'd take a swing at Fitz and smash his fist against a wall. Maybe he'd break his fingers. Some sur-

geon *he'd* make with bandaged hands.

"Sarah, where are you going? My car's at Cabrillo."

I bit the side of my lip. If she was right about this power thing... "I thought maybe we could try another 'suggestion.' In a controlled setting."

"Well..." Fitz clasped her hands. "Sure. So long as I'm not alone."

I stopped where the green fields flow over small round hills. When we were twenty and twenty-one, Fitz and I traveled Europe and the British Isles, laden with the usual student gear. In the spring, Fitz never passed these hills without remarking that they reminded her of Ireland. We got out of the car and hopped the fence.

"Just to be sure," Fitz said, "keep physical contact with me. Hold my hand or my skirt or something. Don't let go or I might lose you."

She didn't have to say it twice. I clutched the hem of her skirt--just in case.

As we trudged up the hill, Fitz snatched at poppies and milkmaids, and sucked at the rich, grassy air. We were just about at the top when she said, "This reminds me so much of those low hills around Lough Mask. You know, the way they sort of stagger, one after the other, all green with little bits of stone? When we get to the top, we'll be looking down at the lake. Remember how desolate and wild it looked?"

She swept the ground with the heads of her flowers. She giggled at some private joke--but not for long.

We stopped at the crest of the hill. Below us was an unadorned lake that looked incredibly like Lough Mask--that is, what we could see of it through the uproar of slashing, stabbing, grappling bodies.

I grasped Fitz's arm. A naked wild-haired man hacked another naked wild-haired man to pieces only an arm's span away from us. I swallowed. "My God, Fitz, where are we?"

Fitz took a step back. "Celtic Ireland," she said.

The victor looked up from his dismembered foe and squinted, then leered at us through a mat of beard. He glanced over his shoulder at the battle. No one was struggling up the slope to chop *him* to bits; he wiped his blade on his thigh and headed toward us.

"Fitz," I said, "get us out of here!"

Fitz, mouth open, reached for my sleeve and slowly pulled herself into action. She let her hand slide the length of my arm to my hand and grasped it tight. "Run!" she said. "This way! No, this way. Yes, this way!"

I bit the side of my lip. If she was right about this power thing... I thought maybe we could try ...

We plunged over the hill and stopped. These were no longer the hills above Lough Mask nor were they the hills above Highway One. For one thing, there were trees--oak trees, I think. Shrubs, bits of fence, what looked like a watering trough.

I turned, staring at everything, recognizing nothing. "*Now* where are we, Fitz?"

"Remember that walk we took in Wales? When we crossed the bull pen?"

I swung my head wildly right to left. Just because we couldn't see the bull didn't mean he wasn't lurking around here somewhere. "Was the bull friendly?"

Fitz dug her fingernails into my wrist. "I don't remember. Walk slowly and maybe he won't notice us."

The bull, when we finally saw him, paid us all the attention a dead dog pays a bone. We reached the far side of the bull pen without incident and climbed over the fence. Fitz lifted her skirt over her knees, wadding it in her fist to keep it from the barbed wire. The bruise on the back of her thigh was fresh and black--and much too big for a brush with a coffee table. My breath caught. She hopped to the ground beside me and held out her hand.

I refused to take it. "He promised, huh? I suppose you were sideswiped by a Cadillac fin and forgot to tell me."

"What? Oh." Her hand closed on empty air and she looked away. She reached for me again. "Sarah, please. I don't want to lose you."

"You should drop David off with those naked guys--and leave him," I said, then took her hand grudgingly. Her palm was damp.

We tromped off toward Porthmadog, no small distance. Once on the road, we nearly got run over. It's hard to adjust to some things in a hurry We walked in silence, Fitz thinking about God-knows-what, me thinking about David. I'd liked him at first. He'd surprise Fitz with picnic dinners--complete with a thermos of French roast coffee and a can of whipped cream. One time he packed her freezer with all her favorite ice cream flavors. It took her weeks, and more than a little help from me, to eat it all.

Then the beatings started. Simple bruises at first, on the arms and shoulders, then black eyes. He just swung at her, she told me, with his fist. And he was *sorry*. The surprises grew more fantastic: a teddy bear wearing a string of freshwater pearls, her dining room filled wall to wall with flowers. But I couldn't share her excitement anymore. All I saw were yellowed bruises.

I squeezed my sister's hand and stared at the stormy clouds above us. "Fitz, doesn't *anything* remind

We had just reached the seawall near Porthmadog. The tide was out, exposing an expanse of bleak, gray shoreline. Fitz hummed deep in her throat. "Maybe, just maybe."

She scaled the wall and I scrambled after her. She took my arm. We walked slowly toward the flat, wet sand. "This kind of reminds me of that stretch of beach near KSCO," she said. "You know the way the sand looks kind of sticky?"

"Fitz, that's a marsh--"

But there we were, and Fitz was right. There *was* a beach there, albeit surrounded by muck. The towers of the radio transmitters flashed to our right, an abandoned restaurant squatted behind us. The road bordering marsh, radio station and restaurant was full of cars driving on the proper side of the street.

"Listen, remember that meditation class we took?" I said. "Clear your mind. Don't think of any place, *please?*"

We took a bus to Cabrillo, drove Fitz's car to mine and somewhere in there decided that Fitz was just going to have to practice discipline. Not that this power of suggestion might not be without its advantages. No, we could see that, but in the day to day, it might be a little much--an understatement.

For example: Fitz stopped to admire a tiled, stucco building one morning on her way to the office, turned the corner and found herself in a square in Spain. Another day, she looked down as she brushed past the little outdoor tables on a cafe, and stepped into the streets of Paris. A swift glance at the San Lorenzo River was enough to land her in Amsterdam. She soon found that walking back the way she came and picking out the suggestive detail that had brought her there, then thinking in reverse, returned her to Santa Cruz. Not always, though--she had a hell of a time getting back from Amsterdam.

Then one Saturday night she went to dinner with David.

According to Fitz, David hadn't laid a hand on her in weeks--or yelled at her. He was making good his promise, and in an expansive mood, he took her out to dinner on the wharf. Shortly after the salad and before the main entree, Fitz excused herself. She went to the toilet, and as she was leaving the stall, she noticed that the door was a lot like the stall door to a Wendy's in Madrid. (She remembered it vividly because she got locked in and had to break a barrette to pick the latch.) Well, suffice it to say, she opened the door into Madrid.

Before a row of sinks, a line of stylish, sophisticated Spanish women waited to use the facilities. It took Fitz a good fifteen, twenty minutes to get into a stall and suggest herself back to the restaurant on the wharf.

David was furious. She passed him at the register, a "to go" carton in his hand--containing *his* dinner--and his Visa card at the ready. He glared at her as he paid the bill, and walked out. Fitz followed, they drove home, she tried to explain what had been happening to her, he hit her, she cried, he hit her again, *he* cried and begged her forgiveness. David asked her to explain the power again, this time listening intently. The next morning, before she left to meet me for brunch, a single rose in a Waterford crystal vase arrived.

She phoned to tell me she'd be late, explained what had happened and hung up before I could plead with her to leave him before he hospitalized her--or worse. I was ready to kill David. I wanted to strap him to a chair and give him a bruise or cut for every one she'd shown me--and a dozen each for the ones she hadn't.

I waited at the restaurant, shuffling to my feet as Fitz breezed in. She lifted her sunglasses, then lowered them. Her eye, circled by the imprint of his knuckles, was all but swollen shut. Before I could say anything, she dropped into the chair across from me and said, "I've heard it, Sarah. Sir--coffee, please. Espresso, if you've got it. Double espresso."

"Fitz--"

She leaned forward and touched my arm. "Listen, Sarah, can you get tomorrow off? David and I are going to do a little experimenting with my power. I'd like you to come along."

I nodded numbly. If she was going somewhere with that jerk, I wanted to be there. Not that I could do more than claw his eyes out, I just wanted to be there.

"Great." Fitz sighed. "Come to my place tomorrow morning at nine." The waiter set a cup of espresso in front of her. She loaded it with sugar. "Do you realize, Sarah," she said lazily, "that it's been eighteen days since I got my power?"

Then she changed the subject.

Fitz called next morning before the alarm went off. "Sarah," she said, "you still have that formal? The long one?"

I rolled my tongue to moisten my mouth. "The short sleeved one with the gathered waistline?"

"The velour one. Wear it."

I slammed the hem in the car door when I got to my sister's. I all but ripped out the hem. I felt like a moron until Fitz came to the door wearing sunglasses and one of her Dickens Fair outfits. Safety in numbers or misery loves company, something like that. If I looked idiotic, she looked completely out of touch. David leaned over her shoulder in his "I'm-not-really-a-doctor" jeans and striped rugby shirt, his buzzed blond hair standing at attention. Apparently, *his* attire didn't matter.

I clumped up the steps in my heels. "Cool dress, Sarah. You look terrific," David said--sincerely enough, but it was going to take more than that to disarm me. By staring at Fitz, I resisted slugging him.

Fitz ushered David out the door, then jangled her keys. "I'm driving. Let's go."

She drove us into Aptos and pulled into the parking lot of McCarthy's pub. She then led us to the closed restaurant. Her hands shook as she wiped them on her skirt. "All right," she said. "I want each of you to hold onto an elbow. Not too tight, Sarah. Here we go."

Through the Trees...

She raised her right hand to quell the reflection as she peered through the window. Slowly she turned toward the parking lot--but the parking lot was no longer there. A horse and carriage clattered by on the rough cobblestones, a stiff-backed driver cracking the whip over the horses' heads.

The stench was terrible, a mixture of horse dung, sea, urine and sour beer. Two women in voluminous skirts and tailored bodices strolled by on the opposite side of the street, a young boy in knickers following with an armful of packages. Several of the buildings sported windows with those tiny diamond panes. It was England, it had to be, but whether it was Henry Fielding's England or Jane Austen's, I couldn't tell.

Someone belched behind me. I turned and a stubbled man in striped shirt and neckerchief ogled me from an open doorway. "'Morning, mum," he said and pushed past me with a wink. I drew closer to Fitz.

She glanced at him like she'd glance at a fly. "He's just a sailor," she said.

David's eyes were round. He let go of Fitz' elbow and stepped onto the cobbled street. "Fitz, this is incredible!" he said. "Where are we?"

A gentleman in a rich green coat and cravat gazed at Fitz with alarm and turned away. Fitz blushed and removed her sun glasses. The swelling had gone down, but the eye was still black. David nudged her. "Where are we?" he asked again.

"England, maybe Dover, around 1760 or so," Fitz said calmly. She clasped my wrist, easing away from David.

David shook his head, grinning with those goddamn perfect teeth. "Cool," he said. "Cool."

People flowed around us, some staring, some pretending not to notice. Fitz they occasionally nodded to, me they sniffed at and turned away from, and David, well, he stopped traffic at one point. Never mind his clothing, which resembled the numerous stripe-shirted men staggering from the public house behind us, his buzz haircut was other-worldly compared to the luxuriant curls and pigtails of the men around us.

Fitz slipped her arm through mine and led me aside. "Sarah," she said in a low voice, "don't let go of me, not for anything. Move, now, while he's distracted. Not too fast, just walk as if you're in the mall shopping for the perfect shoes."

I glanced at David just as a man in a tall, brushed hat yanked him from the path of an oncoming carriage. David turned toward us and Fitz froze, but David's attention was fixed on a gang of eight men in dark jackets and neckerchiefs exiting a public house behind us. The leader, a man in a hat shaped like a lemon wedge, hovered beside Fitz and me, studying David. He nodded to the other men and they moved toward David as a unit. Fitz grasped my arm.

The men surrounded David, who simply gaped at them. The circle broke to admit the leader. I couldn't hear anything at first, then David shouted, "What? What are you talking about--What ship? Listen, buddy, is this some kind of joke?"

Fitz inhaled with a hiss. "Oh my God!"

David shoved aside two men, thrusting his shoulders forward in an attempt to break free. The two men grabbed him and pulled him back into the knot of strange men. His voice rose. "Fitz! Fitz, get me out of here! Let go of me, you fu-- *I'm not going on any goddamn ship!*"

Fitz swallowed, her chin trembling. She stepped toward him, then she touched the corner of her bruised eye. Her fingernails scored my arm. "It's my only chance, Sarah," she said.

She turned away, pulling me past shops and disgruntled people until she stopped at a window with small square panes. She closed her eyes for a minute and I could see the tears struggling. Then she opened her eyes, and without a final glance, she clung to my arm with both hands and concentrated on the wood framing the little panes of glass. She squeezed her eyes shut and rested her head against the window.

A woman in a red jumpsuit tapped my shoulder. "Is she okay?"

I started. We were in the Capitola Mall staring in a shop window. "She's fine," I assured the woman.

We took the bus to get the car. Fitz cried the whole way and I ended up driving us back to her place. Over tea, she said, "I just meant to leave him there. I never dreamed they'd press him into the Navy."

"Can they do that?" I asked, hopefully.

"Sure. The press gangs even dragged men out of bed at night. Sarah, do you know what hell that's going to be?"

I pressed the teacup to my lips to straighten a smile. It was too wonderful. Let David take a swing at old Jolly Jack Tar, or better yet, the captain. He'd soon see what it was like to be battered.

Fitz stared into her cup. "I only wanted to leave him there."

I set my cup down. "Fitz, he wouldn't have gone with you twice."

She smiled weakly. "True."

Fitz got over him. She even went to counseling so she wouldn't get involved with another guy just like him. Once, she and I went to the University library and pored over books on British naval history to see if David distinguished himself. Apparently, he hadn't. And when Fitz met Gary, a real sweetheart, she sent a "thank you" note to the genie of Bahrain.

Not to mention the delightful weekend trips Fitz and I have been taking. Gary's coming with us this weekend. It'll be fun--Fitz found this palm tree near the beach that, well, when you look at it just right, it suggests Hawaii.

❧ *Marina Fitch*

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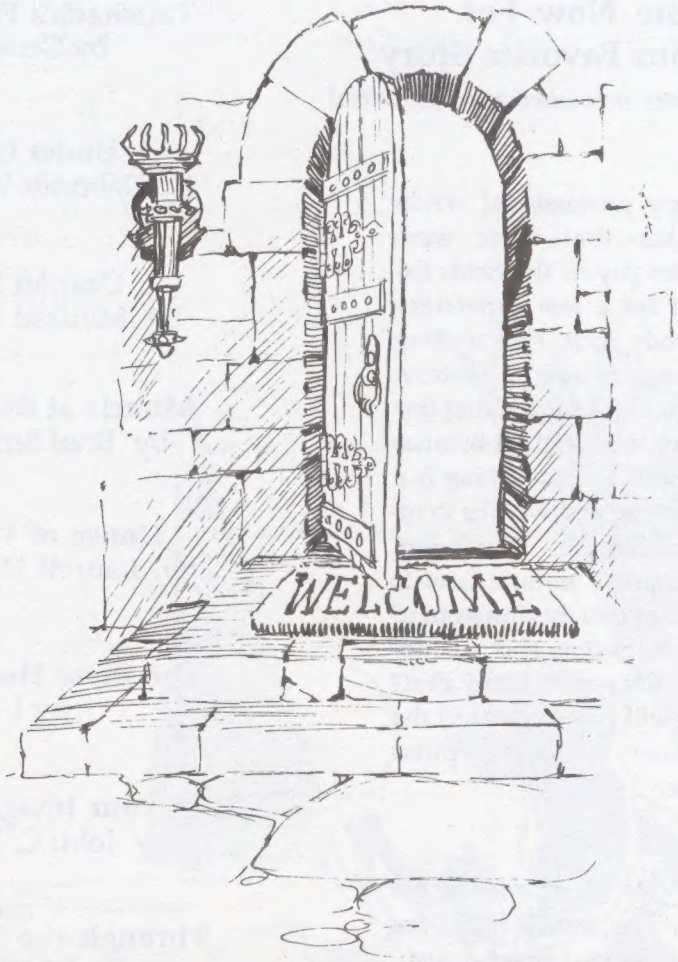

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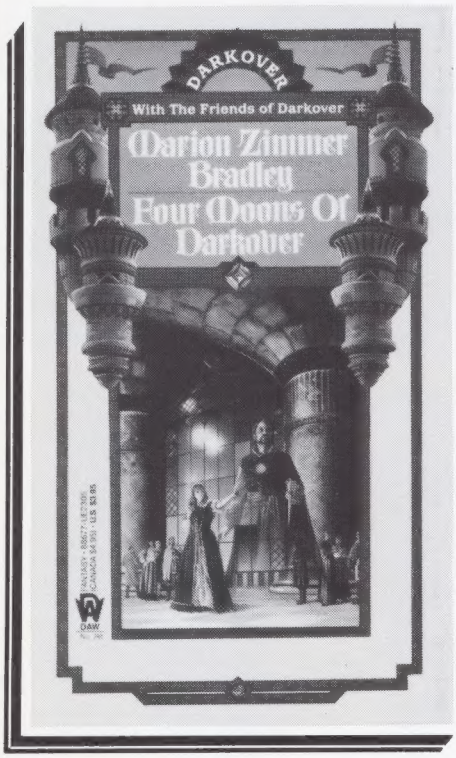

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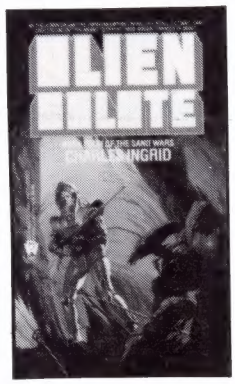

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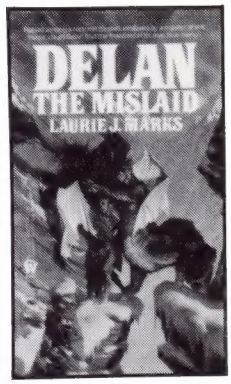

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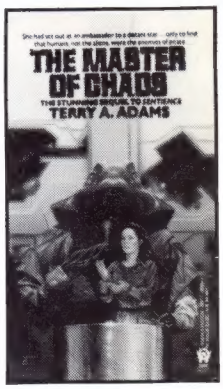

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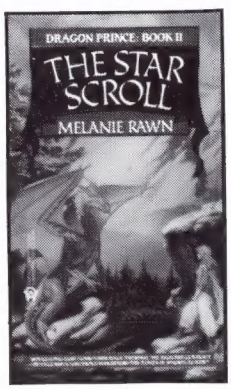

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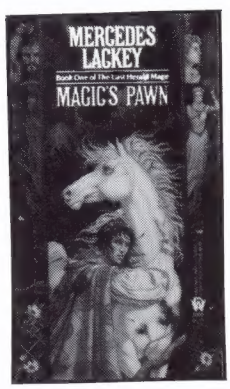

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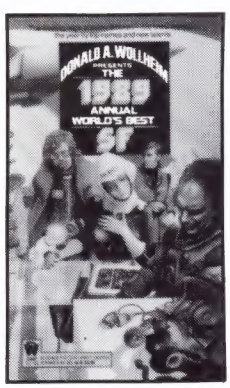

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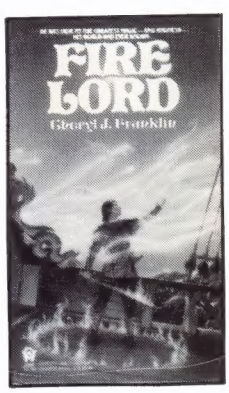

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